

# Asian Trash Cinema

Volume One / Number Five / \$6.00



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# Asian Trash Cinema

Co-Editors: Craig Ledbetter and Tom Weisser ★ Design/Artwork: Francine Dali

## Editorial

from CRAIG LEDBETTER

Each issue we seem to add new writers and this fifth issue of ATC is no exception. Mark Horowitz debuts with an overview of Sammo Hung's career revealing both his thespian and directing skills. Mark has written for a lot of high class magazines and so one has to question his appearance here. I'm sure as hell not going to look a gift horse in the mouth however. David Fears weighs in with a perceptive look at the popular Jet Lee vehicle, FONG SAI-YUK, which was the 5th highest grossing film in Hong Kong of 1993. Jim McLennan debuts a new column on Japanese Animation, something readers have clamored for on a regular basis. Lim Cheng Tju of Singapore's finest multi-media zine BIG O discusses Ringo Lam's latest FULL CONTACT, while Bob Cashill (whose SEX AND ZEN review will see print next time) covers Criterion's landmark videodisc release of John Woo's THE KILLER. Speaking of Mr. Woo, Australian Mark Savage and Britisher John (GIALLO PAGES) Martin both talked to the famed Hong Kong director on a variety of subjects in this issue. ATC also welcomes back regulars Erik Sulev, Max Allan Collins, Chris D., Forrest Batson, David Chute, Travis Crawford, Max Della Mora and John Charles.

Oriental Cinema's Damon Foster has directed a new video called AGE OF DEMONS. It is his wacky tribute to Hong Kong and Japanese monster, superhero and action films. It features blood, breasts and lots of Damon's smartass humor. Write to him at P.O.BOX 576, FREMONT, CA 94537-0576 for more details.

Hong Kong film posters, photos, magazines, soundtracks and more are available from DRAGON ART, P.O.BOX 9307, N.HOLLYWOOD, CA 91609. Send a SASE for their catalog.

CINERAIDER #1 is now available. An excellent 55 page zine mostly devoted to HK cinema. Send \$5 to Richard Akiyama, P.O.BOX 240226, HONOLULU, HI 96824-0226.

Look for ATC #6 around July



*Regarding the knockout on the back cover: nymphet Jennifer Chu is the star of the controversial HK sexploitation flick The Young Tease*

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Cover Art: an original painting by comic genius Ron Wilber.  
Sword of Vengeance photos courtesy of Dan Reed.  
Samo Hung photos courtesy of David Chute





with commentary by co-editor Tom Weisser

# LETTERS

Dear Tom and Craig:

I received the latest ATC this week and while I really enjoyed reading through it I was extremely disappointed to find only two pages of Chris D's Yakuza Filmography. Realizing of course that there may be many reasons for this I never-the-less am annoyed to find you allowing more space for LETTERS, than for any of the articles, (seven pages in which you could have a whole article or another seven reviews). The opinions, cheers, or whining of other readers is not what I'm paying for nor want to see. Though if you wanted to devote seven pages to starlet photos you would get no complaints from me. So how about shredding the letter section or at least cut it in half. And please don't waste any space publishing this letter! Otherwise I am very pleased with your work.

—Mike Handley

To ATC editor--

The letter section remains an ATC highlight. It is always fun to see readers reaction, trivia and responsible negative criticism. Clyde Bergman's ranting was less than responsible. To him I say: This is America, man, where innovation is the rule (or should be). But if all we get are horror comedies and sequels, why the hell not go after stuff from around the world? It's called utilizing video to its maximum potential.

The reviews were a nice mixture of Chinese and Japanese. The new Komizu film [Living Dead In Tokyo Bay] sounds like his most ambitious. He may become a cult director for those who can stomach his efforts. Your review gave me a number of reasons to see this film.

Subsequent reviews were pretty entertaining. The always amiable Erik Sulev offered City Hunter. I fall between Sulev's love/hate extremes over the film. I was amused but felt the movie was Jackie Chan's most overrated comedy yet.

I found Tom Weisser Evil Dead Trap 2 review especially useful. The film is enigmatic and disturbing. Critics of Tom (Anonymous and his pals) are welcome to their masturbatory ravings

if they too can contribute solid movie criticism, but I doubt they can break new ground. I doubt they can even break wind.

—Jeff Segal

Craig and Tom--

Max Allan Collin's coverage of the Baby Cart film was impressive and informative. I look forward to the continuation next issue. John Grace's piece on the Aces Go Places series was great, too-- especially since I recently discovered the first and fourth films on video over here. As for Clyde Bergman, if he can't look beyond Blockbuster then that's his loss.

—Heath Gibney (Australia)

Hey Assholes!

Your worst nightmare is back!

You buttheads think your {you're, Ed.} so Goddam cute-- about as cute as a sack of exploding hemroids! {We're sure you mean hemorrhoids, have you ever heard of dictionary? Ed.} But I don't much like when some hotcock sports fun at me. Just cause I think your magazine sucks you got no call to print my fucking letter and make me look like a ugly stick at a some bitch wedding! On top of that my sister says your {you're} dirty cocksuckers for saying what you said bout family fucking. Something I don't partake to. I'm not somebody to dick with. Just be glad your {you're} not where I live!

—Clyde Bergman

Clyde, you have no idea just how glad we are! And are you positive your sister and mom aren't the same person?

ATC--

Clyde Bergman! Wow! He's a REAL COOL guy! Reading his letter [ATC#4] makes me want to go back to college and get my degree so I don't end up like him! Yes, Mr Weisser's a very sly fox, fooling us so! So Clyde, make sure you write similar letters to Time Magazine (they advertise their own Time/Life books and their own Classic Rock CDs, and hey! isn't it great to see all those

old MTV VJs again? But where's Nina Blackwood?) and write to your local movie theatres. (How DARE they show up coming releases during the coming attractions!)

The more and more I see assholes like Mr Anonymous (ATC#3) and Clyde, the more I think why did God create us? What's the use! Clyde—here are some suggestions on what you can do with your ATC refund: A) Thank Tom and Craig, they didn't have to do that; and B) Go to your local library and organize a book burning to get rid of all those pesky titles you don't agree with. I'm sure Blockbuster Video is PROUD to have you as a member. Without people like you, NOBODY would ever rent those Best Chest In The West videos! [We've heard his sister/mother had a 'bit' part in #9, Ed.] Without great and self righteous people like you policing video store aisles, I might have a little freedom of choice, I might, and Clyde—call this a crazy thought—but I might be able to rent a NC-17 video and DECIDE for myself if it's smut, trash, art or just entertaining!

--Fred Holycross



Joey Wang (Wong)

Dear Craig and Tom.

Issue #4 of ATC is my introduction to your magazine and I couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised. I'm fairly new to the Hong Kong film scene, and your 'zine's coverage of the genre proved to be both knowledgeable and extensive.

Craig, I'd like to thank you once again for taking the time to speak with me when I contacted you personally. Your genuine interest and commitment in Asian Trash films seems to insure your publication a long life.

I look forward to future coverage of my favorite Hong Kong actress, the very beautiful and talented Joey Wang. Her work in films like *A Chinese Ghost Story* and *Diary Of A Big Man* have ranked them among my favorite films. Many thanks to you both for a great magazine.

--Joe Spagnolo

Thanks for the words of encouragement. We, too, are also fans of Ms Wang (Wong). Check out *Beheaded 1000* and *Moon Legend* for two unrated and unusual performances by the Chinese beauty.

Tom and Craig--

I just received my first issue of ATC last week, and I just wanted to tell you how great I thought it was! I have searched for information on Asian Cinema for some time now, and this is the best, most informative 'zine I've found. I've recommended it to several friends and I hope you guys will be around for some time. And as far as all the people who are bitching about your relationship with VSoM, well Fuck 'Em! I have ordered from VSoM in the past and find them to be quite efficient and reliable. And what the hell is the point of reading about these great flicks if you can't watch them?

--Matthew Pennachi

Tom Weissner

How do you sleep at night? You have managed to make an entire culture of serious film-makers look like slobbering, rude, exploitive hyenas. Your publication quickly endorses the infantile carnal extremes of directors like John Woo, Kazuo Komizu, Ryu Murakami and Wong Ching with an embarrassing knee-jerk enthusiasm, but yet you blankly ignore the truly talented heroes of Eastern film. Have you even mentioned Akira Kurosawa's name? Or that of Juzo Itami? Or Koreyoshi Kurahara? I seriously doubt if you even know who these cinematic giants are!

(Please, keep in mind, this is a magazine dedicated to Asian Trash Cinema. We're not interested in examining the political symbolism buried under *Koreyoshi Kurohara's* snow covered wasteland in the tediously slow-moving *Antarctica*, and frankly *Juzo Itami's* satire of the Japanese noodle industry [*Tampopo*] isn't the kind of riveting entertainment that belongs in the pages of ATC.)

Instead of celebrating the joys of life, your magazine dwells on man's dark inhumanity. We cultured readers are subjected to an endless barrage of pathetic homages to self proclaimed losers (*Yakuza* films), sadistic killers (*Dr. Lamb*), insane bloodshed (the *Baby Cart* series), low-rent comedies (*Ace Go Places*), socially unacceptable gore (*Evil Dead Trap 2*), childish fantasies (*Wicked City*), and bargain basement horrors (the *Bloodthirsty* series). Have you no shame?

Obviously this is a rhetorical question. You have already proven your total disregard for society's moral code by your flippant attitude toward the sacred institute of academia. I was personally offended (and I think I can speak for all serious guardians of higher learning) by your quite inappropriate comments regarding your former teaching practices. You said, and I quote: "I'd never fail a pretty girl in a mini skirt." I suppose you would allow those harlots to perpetually skip class and you'd pass them anyway!

—Professor Edwin Ernst

*If those "harlots" didn't show up for class I wouldn't have any way of knowing what they were wearing, would I? On the contrary, I'd encourage them to sit in the front row.*

Tom and Craig—

Thus far I've enjoyed each issue of ATC, but for my four cents worth, ATC#4 is your best issue yet. Every article and review by your talented staff explored uncharted waters for me. Terrific front cover and the back cover isn't too shabby either.

And what a great Letters column. It would be remiss of me if I failed to mention that pic of Amy Yip. I couldn't look at myself if I didn't say this about Amy: Va Va Va Voorn! Ms. Yip looks A-1 fully clothed as well.

—Conrad Widener

Dear Craig—

Thanks much for your prompt response. Much appreciated—editors who actually take the time to read, and respond, to inquiries are rare birds these days.

When I was living in Hong Kong, I called John Woo's office (John Woo Productions Ltd) on a whim in early 1991, not long after the successful Chinese New Year release of *Once A Thief*. I was surprised to find his company listed in directory information, more surprised to find that he was actually there, answering phones in his secretary's absence. (Do you think Steven Spielberg works the phones over at Amblin?)

He was genuinely pleased to hear from a Western admirer. "I'm always surprised to hear that Westerners like my movies." I told him how impressed I had been with *The Killer*, *Bullet In The Head* and the new film, and he talked about how he had been inspired by Sam Peckinpah, Don Siegel and *The Bible*. "In fact, my next film is a Hong Kong version of *Dirty Harry*—the film became *Hard-Boiled*."

He apologized for his poor English, which was quite serviceable. "I was in Los Angeles discussing a United States version of *The Killer*, and the discussions were quite difficult for me." In closing, he admitted to being physically exhausted. "All I do is work on my movies. 16, 18, 20 hours a day. In fact, I have a cot here in the back of the office which I use for sleeping... whenever that's possible."

I let him catch up on his rest, and I was elated the rest of the day. Except, of course, none of my Western friends knew a thing about Woo, so I couldn't share my excitement with them.

By the way, Leslie Cheung's sexual preference—some say gay, some say bi—was a perennial hot topic in the Chinese press. A Chinese friend, who used to be a housepainter, swears that when he was painting Leslie Cheung's pad he saw the actor "entertaining" a young man in his bedroom.

There are plenty of tabloids in the territory, full of entertaining, sometimes malicious, gossip about the stars—it's said one reason Cheung left HK for Canada was to get a little privacy. One story had Chow Yun-Fat abducted by a triad gangster, and forced to eat pig shit, so enraged was the gangster at Chow's stepping out with his girlfriend. And some of your favorite actresses may in fact be "she-males" or sex-changes—don't say I didn't warn you.

—Bob Cashill

Dear Mr Ledbetter:

A friend recommended that I subscribe to ATC, as I am a Hong Kong film enthusiast. I picked up your #4 at my local film bookstore, and after reading through your 'zine, I've taken a "wait and

see' attitude. My problems with your publication are several, and I've listed them below.

First of all, what are you trying to be, a review and information sheet or a girls' magazine? Walking out of the store flashing the back cover of Woo Seik-Hong at passersby was not a thrill. Couldn't you at least keep the sleaze inside? And, as Laurine White pointed out in your letter page, why do you skew to a male (and infantile male, at that) audience? For me, Johnny To's style and Michele Yeoh's performance made *Heroic Trio*--but I almost didn't see it because your review focused on Maggie Cheung's motorcycle outfits. And the exploitive Dr Lamb photos-- come on, guys! At least play fair and print the occasional bare chest or buttocks of Jackie Chan or Liang Kar-Fai.

Secondly, I find a lot of attitude in your magazine--editors, reviewers, readers--everyone is acting like they are the coolest people on the face of the earth because they have discovered and appreciate popular Asian films. It is tantamount to the high school debate team putting on X wear. I love Hong Kong cinema, but zipping out to the Kuo Hwa theatre or down to the Chinese Video Company doesn't make me any smarter, hipper or in any way better than the kid who sees every Schwarzenegger film; it's just my taste against his.

And lastly, tied in with the attitudes mentioned above, why are you so snide about Jackie Chan? Chan is a remarkable person by any standards, whether as a filmmaker, business man, philanthropist, or community activist. Chan rose from poverty and illiteracy to become a multi-lingual, multi-talented, multi-millionaire; he produces, directs, acts, stunts, races cars and motorcycles, skates, dances, sings, does martial arts-- all of them well, and many of them brilliantly. How is he portrayed in ATC? Co-editor Tom Weisser complains about his mugging. Well, Tom, HK acting isn't American style anyway, but Chan is no problem in comparison to his peers; in fact, Stephen Chow makes Chan look like Buster Keaton's stone face.

..There, gentlemen, is what I dislike. Thank you for your patience in wading through my complaints; I haven't used any profanity, so you probably can't print this; should I included a curse in Cantonese to validate myself?

--Gere LaDue

*I appreciate your comments, especially because they are liberate and intelligently presented.*

*We "skew" to a male audience because our audience is predominately male (obvious but accurate). And that audience is more interested in seeing exploitive pics of starlets than stars. I strongly disagree with your opinions concerning*



CC  
L.T. 2007.12.17

Jackie Chan with Anita Mui

the attitude of the ATC writing staff. Their articles reflect an enthusiasm for the films, not some pseudo-cool facade.

*I still don't understand why Jackie Chan needs to mug for the camera. It seems to belittle his exuberant performance. But I've never discredited his extraordinary acting ability. Even so, regardless of your hearty enthusiasm his fringe talents, I'm not ready to nominate him for a grammy-- I've heard his singing.*

Dear Asian Trash Cinema--

There are quite a few people covering the HK/Taiwan stuff now, so I'm glad to see that ATC is tackling Japanese product-- although I'm somewhat disheartened to perceive a certain feeling of prejudice against it, suggested by the tone (and ignorance towards the material) of some of the writers. Japanese film is maligned enough by the "mainstream" press, but to take a swipe at the material just because it is from Nippon, doesn't belong in ATC.

It would be nice if your writers had some research, knowledge or insight in the Japanese film industry-- or just dug up a little background on the films discussed. Instead of judging the film on its own-- it would enlighten your readership and raise the considerable level of your magazine several notches above the competition. ATC can become as excellent as ETC, with just a little more care. Now, I know that research/translation is rough, and that the writers/reviewers don't have to be up-to-date with Asian pop-culture, but it would really make ATC shine.

Again, before I continue: You guys are doing us a great service! Keep up the good work and you'll definitely insure a healthy, long-run. Good luck! Maybe you should get ol' Horacio Higuchi over to your camp. *[It'll be a frigid day in hell before I ever invite Horacio Higuchi to my "camp"]* I'd sooner stick a poker up my dick. Besides that sly-as-a-snob has slipped back to Brazil, where, *hopefully*, the only person he can bore to death is himself }

The Sukeban Deka review was badly written and was poorly researched. Alex Simmons not only seems that he has utter contempt for the material, but care not at all to provide the reader with any insight on the subject. The movies are based on a long-running, and ultra-popular TV series produced by Toei, which spawned three sequel movies. The show was, in turn, based on a popular manga series of the same name.

Your review of Godzilla Vs King Ghidorah was,

well, lacking in insight. I agree that the film is not the best overall in the series, due to a convoluted scenario, but any of the logic that is attacked, can be counterattacked (i.e., "Why do the future people stop in 1992 at all?" well, simply because the futurians need several individuals from the present who are necessary to find the Gojrasaurus. Miki, because she is psychically linked to Godzilla and can "track" him; the professor, because of his expertise on dinosaurs, and Terasawa, because of his expertise on Godzilla-- which is the result of his journey to 1944, etc. and so forth), and so on. The film is entertainment, foremost-- does anyone go through this much agonizing over the shortcomings in the logic contained in a John Woo film? These films have to be measured against their own, and not some overrated Hollywood "Cockbuster."

Also the Yakuza stuff had its flaws, but all-in-all ATC is an ambitious undertaking and all of you should be commended.

--August Ragone (editor of Markkille)

*Thanks for the words. Frankly, I read your letter with mixed emotions. I share your enthusiasm for Japanese cinema; in fact some of the best films I've seen this year (Lone Wolf & Child: The Final Conflict, Last Frankenstein and Evil Dead Trap 2, to name only three) are products of Japan. Yet, I think your criticism of Nippon coverage in ATC is brash. While I agree with you concerning the shortcomings of Alex Simmons' Sukeban Deka article (he's a good writer, but sadly misguided in the wonderful world of the Deka girls), I can't believe your off-handed dismissal of Chris D's groundbreaking Yakuza installments, not to mention the other brilliant articles dealing with various Japanese films, including Max Allan Collins' meticulous dissection of the Baby Cart films. A couple ineffective articles shouldn't discount the worthiness of all the other painstaking ventures.*

Craig and Tom:

Congratulations on ATC #4! I concur that it's the best issue so far. A sidebar to John Grace's Aces Go Places article: The series has been released on Golden Cinema City Laserdiscs in widescreen/subtitled versions, speaking of that company. I think Mark Savage is too hard on them. While they did botch the three John Woo films, their product is invariably of much higher quality than Ocean Shores or World Video. Also, Mark was incorrect about the name of the actor in

**Hard-Bolled and Full Contact.** It's Anthony Wong not Chen.

—John Charles

ATC:

The reason I'm writing is to get something off my chest. As you know Quentin Tarantino has gotten a lot of attention for his movie *Reservoir Dogs*, and rightly so. I enjoyed it very much—until I saw a 1987 Ringo Lam film, *City On Fire*. Tarantino has been quoted as saying *Reservoir Dogs* is a tribute to John Woo. But that's not the case! It's a blatant ripoff of *City On Fire*. Without question, they are one and the same. Sure, *Dogs* is a set up differently and told from the robbers' point-of-view rather than the undercover cop's. But there are just too many similarities to be ignored, and too many to list here. Tarantino even uses some of the same EXACT scenes! I thought plagiarism was a crime! Lam should at least get 'story credit' for *Reservoir Dogs*! With the growing popularity of HK films in this country, it's just a matter of time before Tarantino is found out! I feel much better now.

—Diane Bowman

Dear ATC:

Where to start? Er, well, I'd like to talk about the letter column, and the ongoing topic of VSoM: Angels of Fandom or Scummy Bootleggers. Speaking as someone with no axe to grind in either direction, having never used VSoM, perhaps I can offer a moderate viewpoint as I can understand both points of view.

Firstly, your detractors. I do find the plugs for VSoM (joking I mean, even one response in the letter column took the chance to plug VSoM and their version of *Urutsuki Doji* [*Urotsukideji*]) and I personally feel they work against the magazine as they give the IMPRESSION the reviews (etc.) are a sales pitch. I know two magazine in this country [England] which are linked to tape producers — the legitimate "magazine" from the anime label Manga Video, and "Eastern Heroes," run by a person who has a nice line in HK movies of dubious legality — and I know for a fact that BOTH censor reviews in their pages to remove comments that might be detrimental to sales.

However, I can equally understand your severe annoyance at unfounded accusations of bias, and I must say that I have not been able to detect any evidence whatsoever of such. Your reviews are always the first that I turn to when trying to find

out about an unknown film, and I'm sure VSoM are generally providing a useful service to fans by providing tapes that are unobtainable anywhere else. But I think it would improve the magazine if a clearer line was drawn between editorial and advertisement; carry VSoM adverts by all means but perhaps not in the middle of a review.

There was one bit of news that I found disquieting. I have no real problem with VSoM selling prints of material which can not be obtained from another source (although I'm uncertain as to how they legally do this), but I was sorry to hear that they are still producing their *Urotsukideji* tapes, despite the release by US Manga Corps of the series. Personally, I'd rather go the extra mile and buy official copies, so that the makers of the great HK/Japanese movies are rewarded for their efforts, but I feel that by continuing to sell their version, VSoM is conducting an unfair practice. Maybe you could mention the USMC release in your magazine when you give the plug to VSoM.

On the question of *Urotsukideji* generally, I doubt very much if the version released by USMC is the 'cut' British version. The movie was produced by joining together the first three OAVs, as I'm sure you're aware. As they total some 140 minutes in length, editing was necessary. There are trims to the sex-n-violence, basically removing close-ups of tentacles entering orifices, which is no real loss as they were always pretty abstract.

—Jim McLennan (London England)

We appreciate your comments and opinions regarding VSoM and particularly *Urotsukideji*. Allow me a moment of explanation pertaining to Video Search of Miami's position in the marketplace. The funding for this magazine (and ETC) comes directly from VSoM. So it should come as no surprise that VSoM is endorsed as a source for many of the films discussed within these pages.

Video Search exists as an alternate source for video collectors, furnishing prints of movies otherwise unavailable in the United States. The section of American copyright law known as The Harmon Act clearly states films unreleased in the United States, including original versions of films altered and/or edited for release in the United States, are not protected by American copyright; thus, they are considered public domain.

Specifically, although *Urotsukideji* is now available from US Manga Corps in the USA, it has been trimmed from the original 144 minutes to 102 minutes. And much of the explicit sex and

violence has been scissored from the domestic [less offensive] Manga print.

Regarding your concern over US Manga Corps not getting equal time, I think you're off-base. In the previous issue of ATC we wrote: "Manga has released a version of *Urotsukidōji* this summer. Apparently it is the edited British version dubbed into English, better known as *Night Of The Over-Flied*— with the 'extreme violence and graphic sex' scissored out [the same version has been released theatrically in various USA cities]. There is a chance the complete versions will be released officially in the future." I encourage every ATC reader to seek out and find the Manga version, the transfer is beautiful.

ATC—

First off, having been familiar with Ron Wilber's work before (most notably the *Eros comic Revelry In Hell*) I was not surprised by the excellent *Lone Wolf And Child* cover and the interior *Godzilla* pic. Hopefully, he'll be doing more original artwork for you in the future. (In fact, the cover of this issue features another Ron Wilber original!) The letters section was the liveliest yet. In fact, I wouldn't have minded the least bit if you had continued it through the whole issue. Aside from Clyde Bergman's gibberish, there was a lot of substantial and colorful input from your readers. It's always fun to read divergent opinions and it's helpful when readers point out mistakes in information. Let's hope this keeps up for future issues because too few zines have letter sections as active as this one!

As for the rest of the contents: I really think you managed to strike up a strong balance between the Japanese and Hong Kong material. There was enough in this issue to satisfy either the HK or Japanese film fanatic (and of course, more than enough to satisfy those who are fans of both HK and Japanese films). I'm glad you could use my two reviews; they vastly improved the issue's quality (not!). Tom Weisser's review of *Evil Dead Trap 2* was very insightful, enough so that I'll have to go back and rewatch the film to catch everything that he pointed out. I'd like to read more of Tom's stuff. His capsule reviews in ATC#1 really didn't do his work justice. Erik Sulev's *Dr Lamb* piece managed to capture the spirit of the gruesome film. Simon Yam is really a daring actor and you could probably do a whole issue on him.

—Richard Akiyama

*It's always great to hear from you, Richard. While*

*an entire magazine of Simon Yam might be pushing a good thing too far, watch for Erik Sulev's thorough Yam 'expose' in the next issue. Thanks for the kind words about my *Evil Dead Trap* piece. And continued good luck with your own publication, *CineRaider* (formerly SKAM).*

ATC—

Okay. I'm confused. The girl in *The Killer* is Sally Yeh, right? But now there's a new actress who looks just like her named Sally Yip. What's going on here? Did she change her name or what?

—Carlos Vargas

Actress Sally Yeh (real name Yeh Qian-Wan) inexplicably has changed her name to Sally Yip and these days she is concentrating more and more on her sky-rocketing singing career.



Sally Yeh [Yip]

*Jackie Chan in Crime Story*

# ATC Reviews

**CRIME STORY (1993)**

**DIRECTED BY KIRK WONG**

**REVIEWED BY ERIK SULEV**

Just when you figure you've got Jackie Chan figured out, he'll throw a curve and come up with something different. Chan has created what many will perceive as a radical departure for the Hong Kong superstar, a feature that is essentially a serious one, and Chan's usual mugging and comedic side-breaks are kept to an almost non-existent minimum, giving the picture a harder edge to it, an aspect of Jackie Chan that is rarely revealed.

Despite this, *CRIME STORY* is not a perfect film, although it is easily an admirable and enjoyable one. During the first half-hour, *CRIME STORY* is awkward while it heads toward the meat of its plot, namely the kidnapping of a wealthy industrialist, along with Chan's realization that his veteran cop partner and police hero, Inspector Hung (Kent Cheng Jui Si) is not only corrupt, but the scheming ringleader behind the crime.

Chan tries a little too hard at first, getting his audience to take his character, Inspector Eddie Chen seriously, resulting in some scenes and subtitled lines that just don't work as they were intended to. An early scene in a hospital following the death of one motorcycle cop, and the severe injury of another, following a violent chase with

the gang is overdone, as Chan overacts while demonstrating his concern for his fallen comrades. As well, the film's opening sequence in which Chan recounts his fatal shooting of a criminal the day before to a female police psychologist really has little to do with events that unfold later in the film. Any suggestion that Chan may have some future mental repercussions at a critical time (during a confrontation with the film's villain for example), go ignored throughout the rest of the film, and Chan seems to have little trouble with pulling the trigger on his opponents during the fiery climax. What's the point of all this psychotherapy babble Inspector Eddie Chen? Frustratingly, any hints that a relationship will bloom between Chan and the lovely doctor are similarly tossed aside, since she quietly disappears from the film despite a seemingly pivotal role. What would have been the perfect chance to delve into the motivation behind Chan is wasted. In fact, little information pertaining to Chan's background and reasoning is given, leaving the audience to fill in the "whys" themselves.

Negative criticism aside, *CRIME STORY* does take off for the remainder of the film once Chan and Hung fly off to Taiwan after tracking part of the gang to Taipei. A botched police raid upon a major suspect, resulting in Chan's realization that everything isn't quite kosher with Inspector Hung ("No shit!" we've all been saying up to now),

sends the bulk of the movie along an excellent entertaining route. After Hung murders a key player, keeping his secret safe, the pair return to Hong Kong, only to have a suspicious Chan start to investigate his former idol. Tension mounts as the partners become aware of each other's intentions leading up to the inevitable confrontation.

As Hung, the popular and chubby Cheng is excellent, and is equally adept portraying his recent spate of sinister characters, as well as his more familiar sidekick and comic relief roles. Cheng is completely believable as the criminal who becomes more and more desperate as his plans slowly unravel and is forced to cover his tracks. His gang members also prove to be a nasty bunch, and have a little bit more depth to them than the usual assortment of henchmen waiting to be Chan's punching bag.

Action-wise, CRIME STORY isn't the constant kung fu slugfest that some may be expecting. There are a number well-choreographed punch-ups and stunt-work for Chan, but the film is not a collection of fight sequences loosely strung together. Instead weaving the physical action alongside Chan's equally involving investigative work. Most notable are Chan's and Hung's confrontation aboard a deserted frigate (Jackie manages to bang himself up fairly well), and the final meeting as Chan takes out the gang members in a violent battle using both his fists and bullets, culminating in a gas explosion that takes out an entire block of buildings.

Even with its shortcomings, CRIME STORY is still a pleasure for any Chan enthusiast. A complete change of direction from the absurdist TWIN DRAGONS and CITY HUNTER, CRIME STORY is a refreshing attempt by Chan to avoid recycling his sure-fire success formula, and trying a (temporary?) new direction even if it doesn't meet the approval of his teenaged Asian audience, who prefer lighter fare. Let's hope the upcoming DRUNKEN MASTER 2 will be not only a return to his past, but will also allow us to continue expect the unexpected from Jackie Chan.

## THE KILLER

(U.S. CRITERION LASERDISC)

**DIRECTED BY JOHN WOO**

**REVIEWED BY BOB CASHILL**

The only fault with Criterion Collection's splendid version of THE KILLER is that it makes

you impatient for the rest of John Woo's seminal action thrillers to get similar deluxe treatment on laserdisc. When a movie this good drives up to your laserdisc player in a limousine and parks itself on your platter, you're spoiled for more of the same.

THE KILLER isn't just a good-looking, letterboxed transfer of an exceptional film; it's an act of scholarship about several fascinating talents and how one of the world's most vibrant film industries came to be. Priced this 3 laserdisc set is at \$125, but once you start looking through it, you get the sort of adrenaline rush Lance Henriksen gets in the production footage from HARD TARGET that rounds out Side 6 — except no one sets you on fire.

The discs are a revelation for anyone who thinks Woo's career begins with A BETTER TOMORROW (1986); although in a sense it does, as it propelled the director from a slump, making comedies, Cantonese Operas and martial arts films, to his better known fare of recent years. Among the supplementary material, on which you can while a few pleasant hours in CAV mode, are making-of descriptions and trailers (also letterboxed) of movies like HAND OF DEATH, which the young Woo not only directed, but co-starred in with the ascending Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuan Biao.

These discs dig deeper than that though, delving into an impoverished childhood defined by the church, and excavating an arty 8mm student film titled ACCIDENTALLY that captures Woo's talent in larval form. How, you may ask, did Woo get a grounding in film theory? Partly, we learn, by stealing library books. Gems like this, plus his running commentary throughout the film on an analog track, and a range of stills (including one of him laid low by the arduous shooting of BULLET IN THE HEAD), add up to a complete picture of a life lived in cinema.

"The good people are always misunderstood . . . and the war between people turns heaven into hell," says Woo, who repeatedly points out what a touching, even delicate film his modern-day "Chinese knight" story is, deepening one's appreciation. Woo's talk also takes in his work with actor-icon Chow Yun-Fat, how he transformed a team of martial-artsists stuntmen into movie gunslingers, and how he's coping with the "politics and games in Hollywood" as he makes his transition to U.S. filmmaking.

Production executive TERENCE CHANG also

chimes in on the analog tracks. He discusses the difficulties of working with an intuitive talent like Woo, getting maximum impact out of the budget, and why it's good to have an actor on board (Danny Lee) who's friendly with the police, whom residents unhinged by location shoot-outs tend to call. And yes, he laughs, the "Scared Heart Hospital" sign you see in one scene was a gaffe.

THE KILLER disc was co-produced by ATC contributor David Chute and Julia Jones, who in the supplements have come up with an on-disc encyclopedia of information and commentary, about the past, present and future of Hong Kong film. Included is a filmography on Chow (described as a cross between Jack Lemmon, Robert Taylor, Steve McQueen and Al Pacino), a "bluffer's guide" to the history of Hong Kong movies, a suggested list of favorite titles (like CHICKEN AND DUCKTALK and POLICE STORY) and a demonstration of how the main character's gunshots have their own unique sounds.

The disc also contains a sampling of deleted scenes, taken from a longer Taiwan release print of the movie trimmed by Woo to its lean and mean 110 minute running time. Save for the first, which has Lee saving Sally Yeh from some street thugs as Chow watches, none linger too long in the memory, but are a welcome addition to this "director-approved" disc.

The disc's lapses are forgivable, given the sheer quantity of well-organized facts and anecdotes presented. Though not placed entirely below the frame, the cleaned-up subtitles are terrific; no wonder the original American release of the film was advertised as a "thriller-comedy." But, somehow I missed the elusiveness of "Mickey Mouse" and "Dumbo," changed here to "Butthead" and "Numbruts," and while "Jeff" has been changed to "John" on the laserdisc (further strengthening the director's identification with his protagonist), Woo continues to refer to the character as "Jeff" in his talk.

Duly noted are the absence of a Chapter 34, as listed on the jacket (the movie segues from Chapter 33 to 35, but no footage is missing), that BULLET IN THE HEAD stills are used to illustrate a segment about HEROES SHED NO TEARS and that Woo doesn't provide analog commentary during the deleted scenes -- but these are quibbles.

THE KILLER is the sort of package you have to look hard at to find flaws in -- that's how truly exceptional an achievement it is, and why it's a must for Hong Kong movie lovers.

## DAYS OF BEING WILD

(1991)

DIRECTED BY WONG KAR-WEI

REVIEWED BY DAVID CHUTE

After only two films, the Hong Kong writer/director Wong Kar-wei has emerged as a unique stylist; he always seems to be looking at things from a fresh angle, visually and otherwise. After the intense but self-conscious street-gang tragedy AS TEARS GO BY (1989), Wong was likened to Scorsese. His DAYS OF BEING WILD (1991), set in 1980, leaves some loose ends dangling (it was planned as the first installment of a two-part epic that now apparently will never be completed), but thematically and emotionally, it's all of a piece, and it seems to have no direct antecedents.

Leslie Cheung, the engaging matinee idol of A CHINESE GHOST STORY and ROUGE, gives a just about seamless performance as the observant, disappointed York, a charismatic loler whose hollow personality has the draining effect of an emotional black hole upon everyone he meets. He draws people in but feels no answering attraction, and they exhaust themselves trying to elicit a response. York's alienated icy-cool is partly explained by his wounding childhood: raised for money by an alcoholic Auntie, after his hooker-mother decamped to the Philippines to marry a wealthy client. The pull of the plot is inexorably toward a showdown in Manila and then a gradual erosion of all ordering personality traits by the jungle-forces of chaos.

The well-educated but socially marginal protagonists are non-yuppies who can't afford air conditioning and spend a lot of time lounging around in their underwear as noisy portable fans clatter in the background. And Wong Kar-wei already seems to entertain a world view as fully developed as his film style. He drops in a subplot of a tangential connection between a stolid young cop (Andy Lau) and the main action, and a couple of deftly engineered coincidences that seem to be motivated as much by philosophy as narrative convenience: life is a system of crossed paths and hidden interconnections.

DAYS OF BEING WILD is an intimate film about lost youth, with an undertow of sensuality in the images. The thick visual atmosphere isn't just decoration. It weighs heavily upon the characters, like the steam-heat of a HK summer. Wong Kar-Wei is a real discovery, a major artist.

# FONG SAI-YUK (1992)

## DIRECTED BY YUEN KWAI

(COREY YUEN)

### REVIEWED BY DAVID FEARS

FONG SAI-YUK is based on an actual Cantonese patriot who led a protest against the corruption of the northern Qing (aka Ch'ing, or Manchu) court in the eighteenth century. Sai-Yuk is played by the brash and engaging Jet Li (Linkit, aka Lo Xeng-Lu); originally a Mainland China star, he began the lengthy SHAOLIN TEMPLE series (recently released on laser disc) in 1982 and went on to star in Tsui Hark's THE MASTER (1990) and ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA 1 and 2 (1991/92), while last year he also took over the titular role in SWORDSMAN 2 from original star Sam Hui. As for the director of FONG SAI-YUK, Yuen Kwai bears the usual tortured HK filmography. His personal name is sometimes spelled 'Kwai,' he went under the Europeanized name of 'Corey' Yuen while action-director for the

YES MADAM/IN THE LINE OF DUTY series (1986-91 — see its own convoluted credits argued in ATC #2 "Letters," pp.6 and 10). Along the way, Yuen also directed RIGHTING WRONGS (1987), and SHE SHOOTS STRAIGHT (1991) and NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER (#1) and SAVIOUR OF THE SOUL. Another prominent HK director on the credits of FONG SAI-YUK is Ann Hui (aka Hui An-hua), who came on the scene in the late seventies and has directed many projects: THE BOY FROM VIETNAM and THREE WOMEN for TV, and THE SECRET, THE SPOOKY BUNCH, THE STORY OF WU YIET, LOVE IN A FALLEN CITY, SONG OF EXILE, THE ROMANCE OF BOOK AND SWORD 1 & 2 and even parts of SWORDSMAN 1 (before Jet Li came to the series). For FONG SAI-YUK, she is listed simply — and perhaps deceptively — as "Production Designer."

It may be that the above three filmmakers actually functioned as a director-trio on this film, because the stunts are so extraordinary (thanks to Li?), the action so seamlessly integrated (Kwai at the helm?), and its sense of period and mood so flawless (Hui's sophisticated touch?). If Kwai's past independent efforts are any indicator, he comes from a more contemporary, noir film background, which would also suggest a team approach for this particularly light-hearted "historical" epic. Similar partnerships may, in fact, be guessed for several recent HK films, like DRAGON INN (1992), where Raymond Lee is suspiciously abetted by the much better known 'production supervisor' Ching Siu Tung (director of CHINESE GHOST STORY, TERRA COTTA WARRIOR, and SWORDSMAN), and even HAPPY GHOST 3 (1984) and A BETTER TOMORROW 2, where Tsui Hark may or may not be a co-director, despite what the credits say. Sometimes such co-directorial efforts do get credited in HK films, as with JUST HEROES (1989), where John Woo — even in his career's maturity — still shares a credit with Ng Ma. But it's not always the case — as with the aforementioned SWORDSMAN 1, which ended up listing only three of its six directors in the credits.

And lest we forget, in our unexamined auteurist zeal, that these movies are written by somebody, let me finally mention that FONG SAI-YUK was penned by yet another talented trike: Gao On, Chan Kin-Chung and Choy Hong-Wing. Because of the nonstop inventiveness of the script, and the recurring gender-bending and other mistaken identity themes in the story, I



Jet Li

would like to know more about these witty collaborators. Unfortunately, due to the nature of most of the literature on HK films, writers' credits are not so easy to come by -- for example, could the "Chen Kin-Chung" listed here be the "Chen Guanzhong" (in a typically variant transliteration) who co-wrote Tsui Hark's *SHANGHAI BLUES* of 1985?

At any rate, concerning the other players in *FONG SAI-YUK*, the lead character's mother, a martial artist as accomplished as her son and serving as his in-house *sifu*, is played by Josephine Siu (Siao Fong-fong), who as an ingenue in the sixties starred in many Cantonese comedies and swordplay epics of her own. Sai-Yuk's father is played by the redoubtable Zhu Zhang (aka Chu Kong), who's probably best known for playing "Sidney," Chow Yun Fat's over-the-hill mentor in *THE KILLER*. Rounding out the cast is newcomer Chiu Man-Cheuk, who plays the icily elegant henchman of the corrupt emperor (he also took over from Jai Li the Wong Fai-hong role in *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA 3*) and, as the mother of Sai-Yuk's love interest, Sibelle Hu (who was in Samo Hung's mid-eighties hit, *MY LUCKY STARS*, and Kevin [Kent] Cheung's *MAGIC AMETHYST*).

We first meet Sai-Yuk when he faces off with a bunch of young hooligans at an athletic meet -- they're harassing a cute girl, Ting Ting (Jia Jia Xing). She's just moved into town with her social climbing dad, "Tiger" Lei (Chan Sung-Yun) and her martial arts mother, Lei Siu-Wan (Sibelle Hu). Sai-Yuk, taking up the bullies' challenge, beats them all in a number of outrageous sports contests -- the sight of his queue standing straight out behind him as handily wins the foot race is a particularly goofy sight gag (to the oddly disco-tinged scoring of Romeo Diaz, one of the film's four credited composers -- he has done similar honors for *JUST HEROES*, the *CHINESE GHOST STORY*s, *BULLET IN THE HEAD*, and the *ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA* series). However, the winner Sai-Yuk, still ends up having to fight the whole gang in a great martial arts melee -- until the police arrest the lot of them for the quintessential Chinese film crime, "making a public disturbance."

Meanwhile, the boorish Tiger Lei decides to marry off his lovely daughter to the first man who can beat his wife in a kung fu competition. The gimmick: They must stay aerial in a huge bamboo-and-wood structure built for that purpose in the town square -- the first one to touch the

ground, loses. This leads to a spectacular, tour-de-force sequence as Sai-Yuk tests Mrs. Lei's mettle; the fight between unwilling suitor and martial mom is breathtaking, not only for the acrobatic stunts that take place all over the tournament structure, but also for the wild sequence after both parties fly off it and continue to pursue each other by leaping on the heads and shoulders of the packed crowd of onlookers!

Eventually, Sai-Yuk's mom also enters the fray (as his "elder brother" Tai-Yuk -- don't ask!) and actually wins. But Mrs. Lei unexpectedly falls in love with the prepossessing "young man" during the encounter; when Mrs. Fong realizes the confusing situation, she finds herself -- and her son -- having to run for it. When they try avoiding discovery by disguising themselves as women (?), Sai-Yuk even drolly asks his mom if she's now a "lesbian?" (the Chinese term, *dui shi*, translates as "paired eating" . . .), since she is loved by another woman. Anyway, after a number of ensuing twists and reversals, the young lovers do become united, the "lesbian" confusion is resolved (although tragically), and the film climaxes in a remarkable final confrontation between Sai-Yuk and the emperor's martial arts master as they end up in a horizontal kung fu battle that takes place in a three-foot high crawl space! Ultimately, Fong pere is spared from execution by guillotine (right century, wrong continent) and everyone prepares for the inevitable sequel!

*FONG SAI-YUK*'s extraordinarily complex plotting, most of which has been glossed over here, only reminds us of the generally baroque elaboration of story that characterizes most HK films. In fact, repeat viewing of *PROJECTA, PART II* or *HARD-BOILED* never fail to reveal not only remarkable technical complexity, but also outlandish risks concerning narrative: subplots that only connect three-quarters through, characters who have common links but never actually meet, etc. And this narrative density is only the culmination of long-established Chinese practice in literature and theater, extending from the most famous Qing-period novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (it was filmed at least four times in the sixties and seventies), to the complexities of Chinese "Opera" -- to the often complex seventies kung fu epics of Cheng Cheh (see *TEN TIGERS OF KWANTUNG*). The recent trend in Western Cinema has been toward simple character triangles, such as two-buddies-and-a-bad-guy, two-suitors-and-one-woman-of-mystery, etc.

Perhaps it is this dullness in US product -- plus the clear leap forward in the last decade of HK film quality -- that has precipitated the recent upsurge of interest in HK cinema. When it works, you can get some truly amazing, vital and exciting films -- just like FONG SAI-YUK

## FULL CONTACT (1993)

DIRECTED BY RINGO LAM

REVIEWED BY LIM CHENG TJU

Jeff, Chung and Sam are Chinese gangsters working in Bangkok. Sam, having offended the crime lord, Hung, is forced to work with his cousin, Judge, and betrays both Jeff and Chung. Chung is killed and Jeff is left for dead. After recuperating in a monastery, Jeff returns to find his girlfriend, Mona, has fallen for Sam. He takes his revenge against Judge and his gang.

Though both are stylized action directors who kickstarted the Hong Kong gangster genre in 1988, Ringo Lam's movies have always been more realistic and violent than John Woo's. That is because Woo's worldview of the cinematic underworld has always been a romanticized one. His heroes may be gangsters or killers, but they are bounded by a code of honor that redeems them in our eyes. Lam's protagonists, on the other hand, are more shady characters. They are more complex because they do things that are not so easily forgiven.

A comparison can be made between *HARD-BOILED* and *FULL CONTACT*. Both are the two major films Chow Yun-Fat made last year. In *HARD-BOILED*, Chow and Anthony Wong play opposites -- one is the hard-boiled cop and the other is the scum of the earth criminal. There are no gray areas in their characterizations. But in *FULL CONTACT*, both are good friends that are forced by circumstances to fight against each other. At the end of the film, their friendship remains ambiguous.

While Sam (Wong) cannot be forgiven for betraying Jeff (Chow) in his moment of weakness, Jeff is no angel either. He can only be viewed as a good guy in the broadest sense of the word. He helped an innocent girl out of remorse because he was responsible for her injuries during one of his shoot-outs. But in an earlier part of the film, he killed innocents who got in his way of robbing a gun shipment on a highway. Such moral ambiguity exists for both the "good" guys and "bad" guys in Lam's films. Even the ending of the motion picture differs from the

Chow Yun-Fat (*Full Contact*)



conventional endings for such gangland movies. In Woo's *THE KILLER* and Lam's earlier *CITY ON FIRE*, Chow's character paid the price for overstepping the boundaries of the law. In fact, Lam sets us up by framing the ending of *FULL CONTACT* like the ending of *CITY ON FIRE*, with an image of Chow seemingly mortally wounded. But just when we expect the end credits to roll, Lam hits us with an image of Chow getting up and riding off on his bike in victory. Much like a cowboy riding off in the sunset.

It makes sense that Lam has shot *FULL CONTACT* like a western with its world of lawlessness and moral confusion. The film takes place in Bangkok, one of the last frontier-like territories in Southeast Asia. Just like country music provides the soundtrack to Hollywood westerns, a sparse rock score here provides the urban soundtrack to gun fights of these city cowboys.

The opening scenes are powerful and violent introductions to the two mortal enemies, Jeff and Judge (Simon Yam). When both meet for the first time, the set-up of the scene is shot like both are getting ready for their sunset showdown. The feel of this scene is repeated whenever they meet and their final confrontation takes place at night in a spacious open area. But the best shoot-out scene in the movie happens earlier in a nightclub where Jeff and Judge play hide-and-seek with each other. Both are trying to gun down one another

while hiding and ducking behind pillars, glass panels and mirrors.

Lam reuses the Dario Argento trick of having the camera follow the movement of the bullets to their targets, giving the action a campy and cartoonish look. After *FULL CONTACT*, many other Hong Kong action movies copied this trick (see *HEROIC TRIO*, reviewed last issue).

In terms of violence, *FULL CONTACT* is a more satisfying movie than *HARD-BOILED*. The latter has more stylized shoot-out scenes, but *FULL CONTACT* delivers street violence, such as fists, kicks and knives. That is why it will be harder for Lam to break into Hollywood. His movies are too gritty and mean-spirited compared to John Woo's.

*Lim Cheng Tju is the Project Editor for BIG O, an excellent music and popular culture zine out of Singapore. This review first appeared there and is reprinted with their permission. For more details write: BIG O, P.O. BOX 784, MARINE PARADE, SINGAPORE 9144.*

## KILLER SNAKES (1972)

DIRECTED BY KUEI CHI-HUNG

REVIEWED BY JOHN CHARLES

There has been much ado in the mainstream press about recent restorations of films like *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* and *SPARTACUS* and the re-discovery of various 'lost' classics. If the trash world has a savior in this area, it has got to be Something Weird guru Mike Vraney. During the past couple of years, Vraney has unearthed dozens of ultra-obscure exploitation flicks (many not even listed in reference books) and made them available through his company. While most of the films are 'nude-ruffies' from the sixties, Vraney's discovery of a print of *THE KILLER SNAKES* turned out to be a surprise present for Asian Trash pickers. This Shaw Brothers production was picked up for stateside release by Howard Mahler Films but received an 'X' rating from the MPAA which seriously limited its playdates. After a while it (and Mahler Films) disappeared from view.

The print Vraney found has got to be the scratchiest I've ever seen but it is relatively splice free and is letterboxed to the full Shaw-Scope 2.35 ratio (Criterion is never going to release this on laser disc so you have to take what you can get).

The film isn't quite in the same league as Shaw Brothers horror/sleaze classics like *BLACK*

*MAGIC I & II* and *SEEDING OF A GHOST*, but if you like those efforts, it is still definitely worth picking up.

*THE KILLER SNAKES* takes its cues from the American hit *WILLARD* (1971): bullied, misunderstood youth befriends local vermin and uses the creatures to take revenge against his tormentors. It opens with a child listening to a couple having rough, S&M-tinged sex in an adjoining bedroom. This traumatic incident (relived through affectively nightmarish, incomplete flashback sequences) continues to haunt the now teenaged boy (Ken Kuo-Liang billed as "Kurt Lang" on the film's poster) who fantasizes about ravishing and whipping a bound woman. Lurid bondage pictures torn out of a porn rag decorate the kid's rathole of an apartment where he frequently has to flee to avoid various ruffians. He seeks the affections of a local girl who feels sorry for him. Unfortunately, her life is no better: after her grandfather dies, she must move in with a local hooker who secretly plans to auction off the girl's virginity to the highest bidder.

After one particularly bad day, the kid is joined in his less-than-humble abode by an injured cobra. It seems that the latest aphrodisiac craze is to cut the gall bladder out of a snake and drink the contents. The kid decides to sew the reptile up and nurse him back to health. The viper recovers miraculously and spreads the news around the neighborhood, prompting several dozen other de-bladdered snakes to show up for repairs. Naturally, the old "Thorn in the paw" adage applies here and the boy soon finds himself equipped with a veritable army of serpentine avengers. Good thing, too, because there are lots of deserving customers.

After they beat, rob and humiliate the kid, a hooker and her lackey are the first to go. The head viper flies through the air and dispatches the henchmen but the woman faces a worse fate: she becomes a plaything for the kid, allowing him to indulge in his warped fantasies. The disturbing climax of this scene finds the hooker bound naked and spread-eagled while a snake slithers its way inside her. Next to die is the local snake merchant who falls into a pit full of the slimy little buggers. He is bitten so many times that a news report describes his body as having almost turned black.

Subsequent flashbacks reveal the full extent of the kid's childhood trauma. We learn that his mother was a prostitute and the man was a client who caught the boy watching them having kinky

sex. The child saves himself by tossing a box full of snakes in the man's face (hence the dimstore psychology motivating the murders). At this point, the story goes off on an odd tangent that almost anticipates TAXI DRIVER: armed with serpents, the boy tries to rescue his would-be girlfriend from a life of prostitution. Her female pimp is stripped, bound and tormented by giant komodo dragon-style lizards but the kid is dismayed to find that she enjoys the tortures. Obviously happy to find a willing participant, he has sex with her but decides to sick the lizards on her anyway. Similarly, when the deflowered girl is found, he decides that killing her would be best as she has been "dishonored." The worst is saved for the virgin hunting trick, who is bitten dozens of times by snakes who have invaded his home. With the police closing in, the kid shows a definite lack of appreciation by boxing up his "friends" and burning them alive.... or so he thinks, leading up to a predictably gross finale.

As you can surmise from the above synopsis, THE KILLER SNAKES has something to offend everyone. It's difficult to decide which is more offensive: the treatment of animals (snakes are sliced open, skinned and burned alive) or women (all of whom are either whores, shrews or victims). Naturally this adds to the film's fascination but the proceedings are so relentlessly ugly, you make want to take a shower after viewing (I swore I would never use that line in a review but it really does apply here). No doubt, the "X" rating was given because of the film's bondage scenes which are certainly the flipside of the ones presented in TOKYO DECADENCE (see ATC 4); there's nothing erotic or appealing about these. The sleaze allure is inadvertently heightened by the bad condition of the print (was it the only one released?). A gruesomely fascinating film that will win favor with jaded trash fans.

## LAST FRANKENSTEIN

(1992)

DIRECTED BY SAKE  
KAWAMURA

REVIEWED BY TRAVIS CRAWFORD

You watch THE LAST FRANKENSTEIN with an odd mixture of astonished wonder and nervous apprehension; you keep cynically waiting for the film to fumble its masterful juggling of innumerable complex themes and tones-- for the

the monster examines his mate  
in *The Last Frankenstein*



lightrope act to fail-- but, incredibly, it never does. The film's writer/director, Sake Kawamura, manages to ambitiously blend a myriad of disparate storylines and contrasting film genres into a mesmerizing, coherent whole. Despite its banal title, Kawamura's hypnotic work is more a sublime black comedy than a retro monster flick-- an often hilarious, but ultimately melancholic, study of existential despair, the shallow transience of contemporary urban life, the joys of mass suicide, emotional sterility, physiological evolution patterns, and unrequited passion. Ummmm, did I mention I laughed a lot? "Evaluation is the lowest trait of the human race," one of the characters in the film comments, and I'm afraid my attempts to define the intangible genius that make LAST FRANKENSTEIN such a joy may very well prove his theory correct. Trying to describe Kawamura's film is as frustrating as conveying to someone a recipe composed of ingredients which may seem singularly unappetizing, but when combined, make for one very tasty entree; you'll just have to take the cook's word for it.

The film divides itself into labelled chapters, and its initial entries-- "God Of Death" and "Human Body"-- introduce its unique central premise: Tokyo is being ravaged by an epidemic contagious plague which causes all of its carriers to commit suicide within a 3-5 year incubation period. As the city is engulfed by manic cult groups roaming the streets, extolling the "joys of suicide," college science professor Sarusawa (a nicely restrained Akira Hashimoto) is driven to seek a "cure" from Professor Aleo, a bitterly misanthropic scientist who carries out his

maverick research in a isolated mountain laboratory after being shunned by his former colleagues. Serusawa's current emotional state is frayed, at best—he is still trying to cope with the suicide of his own wife, as well as the ever-mounting death toll surrounding him. His telekinetic teen daughter Mai lapses into an autistic stupor, and Serusawa's desperation pushes him to Aleo.

The material may sound grim, but Kawamura's tone certainly isn't: these early sequences are charged with an edgy, off-center sense of humor served well by the film's deadpan dialogue and equally askew visual style (several scenes are composed as bizare, stylized tableaux. Indeed, some moments border on outright slapstick—a university board meeting climaxes with a shrieking wrestling match on the conference table, and the film serves up other zeniths of goofiness such as characters inexplicably walking backwards through the campus, and a professor's office being flooded with chickens. Kawamura directs each scene with a unique, off-kilter spin (which, oddly, is never intrusive): characters will display sudden warmth and tenderness just as easily as they erupt into unforeseen violence. When the mass suicide of a flock of Sukeban Deka-styled schoolkids sends Serusawa fleeing, the nervy mania of this film's first act settles into a more assured— even serene—tone (although it would be misleading to claim the remainder of the film is superior to those scenes; it's just different).

The hateful Aleo resides in his retreat with his brash "wife" Kurara (later revealed to be an earlier "creation") and his hunchbacked assistant Haruo,



The Last Frankenstein

who has stolen corpses from the university to aid his master's creation of a super Adam and Evabings who are not ruled by their emotions, which Aleo believes is mankind's greatest failure (the film cleverly makes the point that, in denying his feelings and urges, Aleo may be physically alive, but in fact he became a victim of the suicide plague long ago). Mai's psychic energy gives life to the Superman and his Bride, but all does not go as planned: Aleo's plan to have the creatures mate and form a new race of perfect, emotionless beings is thwarted by the couple's refusal to make love because they don't feel it, their love is inconveniently directed towards Aleo and Kurara. Aleo hopes that, in time, the couple will form an alliance, and it's these scenes—in which the cabin's group of seven form a makeshift family unit—that the film really shines, culminating in a "family vacation" to the beach (nicely shot in mock Super-8 home-movie style) that is one of the most curiously moving scenes I've seen in a movie in ages; the brief moment of happiness these social outcasts share amidst so much chaos is genuinely touching.

And ultimately short-lived: Aleo forces a shotgun wedding on the creature and his unwilling mate, which acts as a catalyst for their emotional turmoil, and the forced formal ceremony ultimately ends in a violent confrontation (indeed, perhaps a bit TOO violent, given the relative restraint of the previous hour; the chapter headings 'Apocalypse' and 'Calastrophe' are all too grimly appropriate). Aleo's solution to the world's problems—the removal of emotional impulses—is, of course, his inevitable downfall. The film closes on a hauntingly beautiful note, however, with Serusawa and Mai's reconciliation; the movie possesses one of the few legitimately poignant endings I've seen of late (I'm embarrassed to admit the 'Child of the Universe' epilogue actually had me a bit choked up).

Despite LAST FRANKENSTEIN's comedic highlights (Serusawa's introduction to an amusingly bilingual Haruo and, later, his initial dinner with Aleo and Kurara are two of the most hysterically funny scenes I've seen in recent memory), the final impression one takes away from this film is a mournful, elegant sadness, and a haunting sense of loss. The overwhelming melancholy which pervades the film is most clearly illustrated by its most poetic images: a cluster of umbrella-shielded pedestrians swarming around a businessman who has just

leapt to his death, Sarusawa's dream of his wife's nude, eyeless corpse mouthing the words of his colleague's mundane suicide note, the creature and his bride plopped down in front of a hard-core porn video like a bored, old married couple, the pained moments of unrequited love between Kurara and the creature; the creature's horror upon seeing his own reflection; Kurara's body floating in a bathtub littered with dead flowers. Kawamura's ethereal film is less concerned with being the umpteenth work to update the Mary Shelly Frankenstein story, than it is with creating a subtle meditation on love and loss.

There's so much more about this amazingly rich film I'd love to praise (the lush chiaroscuro cinematography, for one), but I hope you'll just experience it for yourself instead. Like so many of the best films-- oblique yet powerful, enigmatic yet assured-- it's near impossible to describe why exactly *LAST FRANKENSTEIN* works, but it does-- beautifully. And if you think it doesn't quite sound like typical ATC fare, in one sense, you're correct: as a mature, fully-realized piece of genius, there's nothing really "trashy" about it. However, if your interest in current Japanese cinema extends past the spectacles of power-drill phalluses and severed-limb masturbation, then I urge you to see Kawamura's near-perfect film. It's not only easily the best film I've yet reviewed in these pages, it's also one of the best films-- from ANY country, in ANY genre-- I've seen in the past few years. Not to be missed!

## SKIN-STRIPPER

(aka *SKINNED GHOST*) 1991

DIRECTED BY CHEN CHI-HWA

REVIEWED BY THOMAS WEISSER

What a nasty-edged film this is!

Movie producer, Mr. Lau (Lau Nan-Kuang) wants to build an entertainment amusement park (similar to "Universal Studios"), but he can't get the proper zoning clearance from the city. He bribes the police captain with money and the promise of bedding the studio's leading actress, Chi Chi Chiang (Chen Ying-Chi). But the starlet is tired of being Mr. Lau's private whore...

While she sulks on the producer's balcony, lightning strikes a power-generator and live-wires tumble onto her. Chi Chi's body is burnt beyond recognition.

Doctors shake their heads and plastic surgeons reel with disgust. No one can help her

Chen Ying-Chi (*Skin Stripper*)



Finally Mr. Lau contacts a black-magic priest who agrees to perform a "Change Spirit Ritual" on the girl. This involves the kidnapping of another female, skinning her, and attaching the flesh to Chi Chi's burnt body. After the ceremony, the victim's corpse is buried along the sandy shoreline.

At this point, the gory skin-graft horror tale takes an unexpected twist. Three teenage couples go camping at the beach. After one of the boys pisses on the grave, the skinned ghost is resurrected and possesses Chi Chi's body. She proceeds to skin her enemies until the entire bloody mess is stopped by a good-wizard recluse (Mr Vampire's Lam Ching Ying).

This horror movie, admittedly not exceptional filmmaking, benefits from top-notch gory FX and wildly perverse sex scenes. The savage love-making between Chi Chi and Captain Yung, culminating with his bloody skinning, is among HK exploitation cinema's most chilling moments.

*The preceding review was reprinted from Asian Trash Cinema: The Book. Obviously, we strongly endorse and recommend the book, it's the first text on contemporary Hong Kong-- filled with over 700 reviews, 100+ photos (some in color). Available mail-order for \$19.95 plus \$2.90 shipping. Send check or money order (Payable to Asian Trash Cinema) to ATC, PO Box 5367, Ringwood Tx 77370.*



# GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA

by Max Della Mora

with special thanks to Yuichi Suzuki

**GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA** is the union of two different aborted projects: **MOSURA VS BAGAN** and **GODZILLA VS GHIGAMOTHU** (**GIGAMOTH**). The first project deals with the conflict between Mothra and the *Henshin Kajo* (Transforming Monster) Gaban, similar to *Barangas* from the recent Japanese/Australian TV series **ULTRAMAN TOWARD THE FUTURE** (**ULTRAMAN ALIEN**

**INVASION**). **GODZILLA VS GIGAMOTH** was basically the same concept as **GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA**, simply under a different title. Initially there was supposed to be another armored caterpillar, born from Mothra's egg, which mutated into a gigantic coelocopter, similar to the one which appears in **GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA**, before [Batra].

## GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA

A giant meteorite falls into the sea and awakes Godzilla, causing a tremendous typhoon which provokes a landslide on an tiny Indonesian island. The landslide reveals a huge, colored egg.

After a good beginning, the movie goes decidedly off-kilter with an INDIANA JONES segment (they may call it a homage, but to me— it's a ripoff) featuring an ex-archeology professor, now artifact-thief! While spending some time in a Thai-jail, Tekuya is contacted by the National Environment Bureau. They want him to lead an expedition to Infant Island to investigate the strange occurrences. Why they chose him is never explained—the Indiana Jones-tone was probably added as an afterthought (it seems out of character in the film), but it represents an attempt to give depth to an otherwise shallow character. It also provides moments of "humor" because with him on the expedition is his ex-wife Masako who constantly complains about her lack of alimony.

The threesome— Tekuya, Masako, and Andoh from the Marutomo Corporation (a company which is building resort hotels on the island)— find Mothra's egg, as well as two Cosmos (the Cosmos were a race of miniature sized beings who populated the Earth 12,000 years before the humans). Historically, the Cosmos civilization worshipped Mothra as a god, and through their religion, the scientists learned how to control weather, thus changing the Earth's law of nature. As a defense against the Cosmos, the Earth unleashed Black Mothra (Batara) who destroyed the weather control machines. Mothra retaliated and defeated Batara, but she couldn't protect the Cosmos race. They were destroyed by the resulting earthquakes and hurricanes.

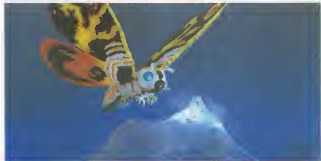
Now, the two surviving Cosmos (two little girls better known in older GODZILLA movies as Shobijin and Aerieas) warn that what happened to their race may happen again to the humans. Indeed, deadly Batara



appears from the sea attacking and destroying the coastal city of Nagoya.

In the meantime, Mothra's egg is being taken back to Tokyo aboard a large fishing barge. Suddenly, along comes Godzilla! (At this point the movie kicks into high gear.) In the nick of time, the egg hatches and releases a caterpillar Mothra. The two monsters go into battle. Mothra is defeated, but then Batara appears and attacks Godzilla from the ocean's floor. (Have you ever wondered how Godzilla can fight in the sea? Since his feet don't seem to touch bottom, does he float? Or maybe he's swimming?) While fighting, the two giants disappear into an underwater volcano. Are they dead?

A bit later, the two Cosmos are kidnapped by Andoh. He takes them to the boss of the Marutomo Corporation where they are groomed as mascots for the company. But Mothra, telepathically connected to the two micro-girls, attacks the city of Tokyo to save them. While the Cosmos sing "Mousu Ya, Mousu!" Mothra destroys the naval force.



Takuya, proving himself to be nothing but a rogue, steals the two Cosmo from the coporation— only to negotiate a similar deal with an American industrialist. However when his daughter pleads with him to save the mini-girls, Takuya finds his conscience and changes his mind. In turn, the Cosmo show their thanks by stopping Mothra from performing any further destruction.

Mothra attaches herself to the Tokyo Government Palace, covering herself with a web-like foam— obviously a cocoon. Meanwhile, Godzilla rises from Mt. Fuji and heads toward Tokyo. Mothra has now developed into a rainbow-colored butterfly, and Batara, rising from the sea, has turned into a devilish flying insect.

First Batara attacks Mothra, then, when Godzilla appears, the two unite against their common enemy Godzilla, weakened by the powder from Mothra's wings, is transported towards the sea. However, Batara is fatally injured by Godzilla and both fall into the ocean. Now, Mothra and the two Cosmo have to finish Batara's mission by destroying a giant meteorite which is about to clash with the Earth. Will they accomplish their aim? Perhaps this question will be answered in future films since *GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA* ends with Mothra and the girls heading towards outer space.



## OPINION

*GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA* is a tribute to old Godzilla movies, written by Kazuko Omon (director of *GODZILLA VS BIOLANTE* and *GODZILLA VS KING GHIDORAH*). The basic plot is not only identical to the original *MOTHRA* (directed by Inoshiro Honda, 1961), but there are also salutes to other Toho films. For example, Takuya wants to disconnect the barge from the boat while Andoh opposes. (Godzilla is approaching and wants to destroy the giant egg) just like in *KING KONG VS GODZILLA*, 1962). Or when Batara attacks Nagoya, destroying the famous city castle— it was already destroyed 29 years earlier by Godzilla (*GODZILLA VS THE THING*, 1964).

Unfortunately, *GODZILLA VS QUEEN MOTHRA* falls into the pitfall of easy environmental moralism with a lot of embarrassing lines about how humankind is going to destroy itself by changing nature's will. On the plus side, the FX are especially good and noteworthy. Batara as both caterpillar and coleopter is excellent, however Mothra— during the caterpillar stage tends to look fake because of its high gloss exterior.

## ATC PREVIEW: GODZILLA VS MECHAGODZILLA

The new wave of *GODZILLA* movies have proven to be financially successful, especially in Japan. Toho Studios has just released (December 23, 1993) *GODZILLA VS MECHAGODZILLA*, directed by Takao Okawa. Here is a brief plot summary.

A group of scientists find two eggs, one still intact while the other has already hatched. They try to bring the egg back to Japan from Adonoo Island, but Rodan and Godzilla appear and start fighting. Rodan is defeated while the scientists escape. The egg, thought to be that of a Planarodon, hatches in a laboratory and a baby Godzilla emerges.

Adult Godzilla shows up, apparently attempting to rescue his offspring, while G-Force of the United Nations sends Mechagodzilla to defeat Godzilla at Suzuke Mountains. Mechagodzilla almost conquers his enemy, but then runs out of steam. Godzilla attacks Kyoto where he finds Baby Godzilla. But the little critter shows signs of fear, so Godzilla returns to the sea. Scientists discover Godzilla has a second brain near his spinal column and they think it's his weak point. G-Force plans to lure Godzilla by taking Baby Godzilla to Tokyo Bay, but enroute the offspring is snatched by Rodan. Mechagodzilla fights and kills Rodan, and then attacks Godzilla. Mechagodzilla thrusts its electric claws into G's back almost eliminating him. Fearing that his father is going to die, Baby G screams. The scream brings Rodan back to life and the newly revived Fire Rodan attacks Mechagodzilla. This time, the robot definitively kills Rodan and its carcass falls near that of Godzilla. Then Rodan transfers its super-powers to Godzilla, transforming him into Super Godzilla. He destroys Mechagodzilla. Together, Godzilla and son, return to the sea.



## ENTER THE FAT DRAGON: SAMO HUNG

by Mark Horowitz

Sammo Hung is fat.

He is also an astonishing martial artist, a dazzling acrobat, an engaging comic actor and most of all, a world-class director of action films. Still, his exceptional girth is the first thing most people notice about him. Although the standards of celluloid beauty are even more unrealistic in Hong Kong than they are in Hollywood, Sammo has starred in scores of films in just 13 years, including some of the biggest box office winners in the city's history. The breadth of his appeal is unique: Kids cheer the eternally boyish Jackie Chan, women swoon over soulful Chow Yun Fat (and men over winsome Maggie Cheung), but as the salesgirl at the Chinatown video store said of Sammo Hung (at first she didn't know whom I meant because I used the star's anglicized name): "Oh, you mean Hung Jinbao. Everybody likes him."

Indeed, Hung seems to be a talent for every trade. He received his training as an actor and stuntman at the legendary China Drama Academy, where he studied Peking Opera techniques with "martial brothers" like Jackie Chan. This arduous training, which emphasizes comic skills and slapstick as much as gymnastics and the martial arts, is what distinguishes Hung and his classmates from earlier, surlier martial arts stars like Bruce Lee, who was hardly celebrated for his lighter side. Early in his career, Chan was obliged to play humorless heroes in the Lee style, against the grain of his own comic inclinations. However, with his good looks and extraordinary physique, this wasn't an insurmountable hardship. Sammo Hung, nevertheless, could never have passed muster in those circles, not with his jolly-poly silhouette and sweet countenance. His film career is symbolically linked to the arrival of the

action-comedy genre that he, Chan and a few others created to suit themselves.

From the beginning, Hung adopted a self-deprecating surface persona with something steely lurking just beneath. In film after film Samo is burdened with nicknames like Teapot, Chubby, Porky, or Dumbo. In *TWINKLE TWINKLE LUCKY STARS* (1985) his friends call him "Fatty" and he acts like a whiny wimp — but during the film's climatic fight sequences in a gym, he grabs two handy squash rackets and effortlessly humiliates an opponent (armed with sai, short swords) in a flurry of precision blows. Samo's grace can shine forth in nonviolent contexts, too. In the engaging (if egregiously entitled) *ONE VS DUMBO* (1984), he astonishes a date by leaping onto the dance floor for an impromptu homage to Hollywood production numbers. As light on his feet as Gene Kelly, Bruce Lee's former sparring partner dances up a storm. Samo's talents are even more astonishing because (as he well knows) they are belied by the first impression.

His prowess always emerges with unarguable force. Hung, like Chan, performs all his own stunts, and these feats are designed to flabbergast, to make you wonder how they manage to survive. (Of his approach to stunt work Samo says, "I think we are usually more concerned with finding the line of safety . . . and then seeing how much further we can push it.") In his *WINNER AND SINNERS* (1983), Samo leaps over a flaming buffet table, crashes through a full length window, lands on his back on a stone pedestal, hops up, and dashes off screen night. The first time you see one of these stunts — and realize that there will be no cutaway to a longshot of a stunt double — you can't believe what you're seeing. How do Hong Kong movie makers get insurance?

Samo, after all, began his film career as an actor, stuntman, and fight arranger. He can be seen briefly as Bruce Lee's sparring partner in 1973's *ENTER THE DRAGON*. (Bruce beats him silly.) Years later Samo got his revenge, at least symbolically when he named one of his first directorial efforts *ENTER THE FAT DRAGON* (1978). Hung began directing his first film in 1977, churning out kung fu pictures laced with comedy for megafilmic Golden Harvest company: *IRON-FISTED MONK* (1977), *THE DEAD AND THE DEADLY*, *WARRIORS TWO* (1978), *KNOCKABOUT* (1979), *THE VICTIM* (1983), and *PRODIGAL SON* (1981). At the time, the mixture of comedy and traditional martial arts looked like a bold innovation, although in retrospect these films (like Jackie Chan's first efforts) still seem solidly loyal to tried old kung fu film conventions. The fights still degenerate into metronomic demonstrations of kung fu moves, and the same moth-eaten period sets and costumes trotted out over and over. But there is a first glint of something new: a bracing ironic awareness of the thin line separating the noble warrior from the conscious bully.

*PRODIGAL SON* exemplifies this first phase of Samo's directing career. The story is not, to put it kindly, terribly original. A desolate young man (Yuen Biao) must acquire skill and discipline to avenge the killing of

his *sfu* (master). But the comic beats are fresh. Biao's master makes his first appearance in drag — he's the star female impersonator in a traveling Peking Opera company. Naturally, though he's a sensitive soul (he even has asthma) the master's hands and feet are lethal weapons. Later, another *sfu* helps in Yuen Biao's training — not another drag queen, but the overweight father (Samo) of an equally overweight daughter. Both, it turns out, are consummate kung fu fighters.

(Samo's devotion to keeping a sly slant on the genre is even more staunch than Jackie Chan's. While Chan has recently played aggressive cops, Hung has almost never essayed a representative of law and order. He's far more comfortable on the other side of the fence, playing an ex-con, a professional gambler, a pickpocket, a con man. His characters never trust the fuzz. Typically, he plays a coward or a loner who has to be dragged kicking and screaming into the role of reluctant hero.)

It's a miracle, in a way, that talented filmmakers like Hung, Chan and a few others could have emerged from a movie factory as single-minded as Hong Kong's. This is a world in which actors and directors often labor fanatically on more than one project at a time, rushing blindly from set to set. Would-be connoisseurs of Hong Kong cinema have to be prepared to doze through a lot of mulch. Samo alone has directed at least 22 movies since 1977, has acted in close to 50, and through his two production partnerships, Bo Ho and D&B Films, has produced well over 30 others that he did not direct or appear in. David Overby might have been thinking only of the numbers when he observed, in program notes prepared for Toronto's 1987 Festival of Festivals, "The contemporary Hong Kong cinema would be unimaginable without Samo Hung."

To appreciate the fast and furious conditions of 80's filmmaking, Hong Kong-style, it's best to think of the hyper-productive American movie mills of the 30's and 30's: the ones that produced silent comedies by the truckload, cowboy serials by the mile. To understand a productive whirlwind like Hung, it helps to remember that in the 1930's John Wayne starred in over eighty B-movies in the eight years preceding his 32nd birthday — eighty films before he became a full-fledged star in *STAGECOACH* (1939). It's a world of nonstop overlapping, 24-hour moviemaking, a blast furnace that forges artists with special strengths and weaknesses.

Samo Hung is no exception. In fact, Samo may embody both the best and the worst that the Hong Kong studios have to offer. Of Hung's films, as an actor-director, *CARRY ON PICKPOCKET*, *WINNERS AND SINNERS*, *MY LUCKY STARS* (1982) and *TWINKLE TWINKLE LUCKY STARS* are mediocre productions with the flimsiest of tacked-together plots. The last three are installments in an incredibly successful comedy series that follows five wacky buddies as they chase women and globber crooks. Violent action is jarringly interspersed with lame slapstick as if the sequences have been cut together from different films. Even for the dedicated Samo-phil, these specimens are heavy sledding.

When Samo Hung is good, however, no one in Hong Kong - or anyplace else - can touch him. Several of his best films were shot on locations outside Hong Kong. Perhaps, far from the madhouse distractions of home, he is better able to focus all his talents on the task at hand. One of his most fully rounded and thematically consistent comedies, for instance, *WHEELS ON MEALS* (1984), was filmed mostly in Spain. It follows two expatriate Chinese fast-food salesmen (Jackie Chan and Yuen Biao) who fall in love with a Spanish heiress (the luscious Lola Forner, a former Miss Spain). When Lola is kidnaped by gangsters, the lads join forces with a bumbling would-be detective (Samo), and ride off to her rescue. In keeping with the Iberian locations, the Chinese heroes are latter-day romantic Knights Errant who end up storming a real castle for their damsel in distress. Naturally, *WHEELS ON MEALS* also contains plenty of spectacular fight sequences and stunts, including a hair-raising comic "pratfall" by Biao, who hops blithely from a second story window and lands right on his keester. The film was, of course, a runaway hit everywhere in Asia (I've come across only one other Hung comedy that had a similar "finished" quality, *OWL VS. DUMBO*, about a retired burglar who is blackmailed into helping a struggling school for juvenile delinquents.)

Even the worst Samo Hung pictures contain at least one terrific action sequence and, despite his undoubted

flair as an actor, martial artist, and comedian, it's as a director of exuberant, body-slamming action that Samo truly excels. He has a special genius for this kind of hyperkinetic moviemaking. He loves stories with casts of characters and several carriers of gravity, to justify a probing visual style that hops from one shifting angle to another. Samo Hung will cut more in a quiet dinner-table scene than most directors would in a power-packed fight sequence. As a star in his own films, he rarely plants himself center stage. He is forever trying out a new point of view.

His best film so far, *EASTERN CONDORS* (1987), contains more action sequences of sustained originality than *ROBOCOP*, *LETHAL WEAPON*, and *PREDATOR* put together. Hung shot it in the Philippines and in Edmonton, Alberta, back-to-back with *SHANGHAI EXPRESS* and *PAPER MARRIAGE*, as part of a co-production deal with a Canadian company. *CONDORS* is a departure for Hung, a traditional action adventure story with no comic interludes. Plot elements from *UNCOMMON VALOR*, *RAMBO*, *THE DIRTY DOZEN* and even *THE DEER HUNTER* are freely "borrowed." A group of Chinese-American army commandos with prison records are parachuted into Vietnam to destroy an abandoned U.S. munitions dump before the Viet comms can get their dastardly mitts on it. The classy cast includes, besides Hung himself, Dr. Heng S. Ng (THE KILLING FIELDS) as a portland peasant who aids the commandos, and Liu Cheng Ling, who played the female impersonator in *PRODIGAL SON*, as a U.S. officer. Doe-eyed Go Lai Hung (aka Joyce Godenz, Miss Hong Kong Universe of 1984) is a fierce anti-government guerilla. Her heroic death scene is a pip so, before expiring, she pulls the knife from her own chest and plunges it into her killer's corpus. (In keeping, perhaps, with his anti-macho image, Hung presents more women in strong action roles than any other H.K. director this side of Tsui Hark.)

*CONDORS* has the richness and heft of a major production - a real movie. Production values are glossy, and every widescreen shot is beautifully composed. Samo knows when to step back and let the actors cook and when to cut loose. The sheer confident boldness of the stunts he pulls is breathtaking, like the moment when the camera adopts the point-of-view of someone's high-flying foot as it kicks an opponent in the head!

Along with the slightly younger filmmakers of the '80s called "Hong Kong New Wave," Samo Hung is still under forty - his best work should still lie ahead. He already has several finished films (including a rampaging ghost thriller) queued up for release, and he shows no signs of slowing down. His enduring strength, evident from the very beginning of his career, is his ability to embody two contrasting mythic types at once: the unbeatable lung fu tiger, and the fat, bumbling, good-hearted loser. Samo Hung is the perfect hero for those of us who are less than perfect.

(Mark Hoenes has written for *FILM COMMENT*, *AMERICAN FILM*, *THE NEW YORKER*, *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY* and *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. ATC is going to look really strange on his résumé.)





## The Translated Baby Cart Series: **SWORD OF VENGEANCE**

by Max Allan Collins

Part two of two

**Editor's note:**

*In the previous issue of ATC, author Max Allan Collins provided an overview of the KOZURE OGAMI phenomenon: the wildly successful manga (comic book) series created by writer Kazuo Koike and artist Goseki Kojima, which spawned stage plays, hit records, a TV series, and the six-part SWORD OF VENGEANCE cinematic saga, written by LONE WOLF creator Koike himself and starring the late Tominoburo Nakayama as Ito Ogami and Akshiro Tomikawa as Daigoro. In Part Two, Collins discusses the individual films in the BABY CART series.*

BABY CART #1: LEND A CHILD, LEND AN ARM, directed by Maumu, brings Kojima's images to life, as the bouncing ball of several pretty girls reminds Ogami of the choice between ball and sword that he gave his young son. The use of sound in these films is consistently interesting: in LEND A CHILD, silence signals flashbacks, including the story of the Yagyu plot to frame Ogami, the murder of his wife, and his beginning on the road to hell.

The title LEND A CHILD, LEND AN ARM is a banner that Ogami, wheeling his cart along roads and through villages, displays; he is willing to work for money, and

the meaning of the first part [*Lend A Child*] becomes clear when a madwoman mistakes Daigoro for her own recently deceased infant, taking the boy into her arms and inserting her breast into his hungry mouth.

Such unexpected, delightfully off-kilter moments are typical in these films. But there is familiar territory, too: if a ronin is similar to the wandering gunfighter of the American west, these films are wonderfully inbred offsprings of the Italian western (inbred when you consider that *YUJIMBO* beget *FISTFUL OF DOLLARS*, an Italian reed of a classic American movie genre.)

In *LEND A CHILD*, Ogami enters a town held hostage by brigands, he is there on a mission to stop an assassination, but he is undercover, and on his way in, does nothing to stop a brutal rape and murder. Single-minded, his duty is to those who hired him. In a particularly shocking sequence, a lowlife outlaw forces him to "make sex" with a prostitute; he consents because (we later learn, from the prostitute) he saw the woman preparing to bite off her own tongue in suicide.

The complex sense of honor here is indicated by the prostitute's shame: her reluctance to give her body to Ogami has only to do with the humiliation she would bring to great a fine man of an honored class.

In great spaghetti western tradition, after several reels showing how utterly despicable they are, the bad guys are well and truly mowed down by an avenging angel of death.

The only weakness of *LEND A CHILD* is the poor make-up and lousy performance of the actor portraying arch-enemy Retsudo Yagyu. His presence disrupts an incredible duel, during which Ogami puts Daigoro on his shoulders, the child wearing a mirror to reflect the sunlight in their opponents' face.

*BABY CART #2: BABY CART AT THE RIVER STYX*, also directed by Miumi, features fluid, swirling camera work worthy of a Brian DePalma film, only less intrusive; the stately musical score underlines Ogami's dignity, as he teaches his child to count, or one-ups a snobbish inn-keeper who mistakes Lone Wolf and Child for penniless trash. In a vicious forest battle, Daigoro aids his father—inside the rolling baby cart, the child ejects rocks to cut off the legs of opponental. But Ogami is badly wounded, and in one of the most memorable scenes in the saga, the tiny child aids his father—carrying mouthfuls of water from the stream to the bleeding Ogami, dribbling the life-giving liquid over his father's cracked lips.

But later, when the child is kidnapped, Ogami tells his foe that if they must kill his child, so be it, informing the boy: "Daigoro! Your mother is waiting for you at the River Styx. Understand?" The sentiment between father and son is real, but sentimental these movies aren't.

Ogami is being tracked by the Yagyu clan's female assassin, Sayka. When approached for the task of killing Lone Wolf, she and her remarkably well-trained female warriors demonstrate their power against (typically) a volunteer: the poor bastard is soon flayed, his nose here, an ear there, her an arm, there a leg, until his limbless torso is put out of its misery.

Even so, the girls are no match for Ogami, of course, although Sayka herself quickly—almost supernaturally—retreats, running backward toward a field, and spends the rest of the film waiting for the right moment for her rematch.

That re-match never quite comes, as she witnesses both sides of Ogami—the terror-inducing warrior, and the compassionate father—and, ultimately, chooses not to challenge him. Ogami's task—to stop three assassins, among other things—climaxes in a desert battle with the three brothers, attired in weird straw monk's hats, skilled in various oddball martial arts.

Beautifully staged, the clash in the desert features comic-book-like silhouettes as Ogami stands starkly against the sky, as if Kojima had fudged sketched him there, sword at its characteristic flourish of an angle, robes fluttering blackly, like splashes of indie ink.

But it isn't indie ink that's splashed in the bottle scene, and one of Ogami's foes, awestruck (as well as swordstruck) spends his dying moments complimenting the Lone Wolf on his skills: "The whistling through the hole! I always dreamed of cutting somebody like this—I never expected to hear that sound in my own throat..."

Kenji Miumi's sure directorial hand is at work in *BABY CART #3: FLYING ON THE WIND OF DEATH IN A BABY CART*, the clumsily dubbed version of which is known variously as *LIGHTNING WORDS OF DEATH* and *LUPINE WOLF*. Kojika's script explored the question of whether a samurai can exist in a now honorless time and land; he demonstrates men's brutality by the dishonorable manner in which women are treated specifically, rape. A ronin, not unlike Ogami, has teamed up with several lowlife mercenaries, on their way to serve a lord for some trivial reason; when the mercenaries rape two women and kill their male escort, the ronin insists that one of the mercenaries be killed to cover up the crime, to protect the honor of the lord they will soon be serving. The ronin also reluctantly kills the two already-victimised women, because they are witnesses to the crime committed against them!

Wheeling Daigoro along, it's Ogami rumbles onto this scene, in the midst of the ronin's peculiar sense of how to pay honor to his lord, and casually dispatches the mercenaries when they look sideways at him. But he refuses to do battle with the ronin, saying he would prefer that there remain at least "one true samurai" in the world.

Soon, as he and Daigoro stay at a roadside inn, Ogami's own quirky code of honor comes into play when he defends a virgin sold into prostitution; the reluctant prostitute-to-be has bitten off the tongue of her pimp, killing him in the process of raping her, and has scrambled for cover in Ogami's room. When local Yakuza soldiers come looking for the girl, the Lone Wolf protects her, viewing the room at the inn as his home and castle.

After some verbal fencing and physical skirmishing with the local Yakuza's female leader, Ogami buys the young woman's freedom by taking her place in ritual torture. Daigoro looks mutely on as his father undergoes

water-torture and wood-whipping, Ogami soaring his tormentors with his stoicism. This sequence demonstrates both Ogami's strength of will and his true heroism; though an assassin, he is not an anti-hero.

The female Yakuza leader and her father hire Ogami to kill a corrupt governor, the Lone Wolf has barely begun his mission when the governor himself tries to hire the assassin. When Ogami turns down the assignment, the governor figures out that he himself must be the Lone Wolf's target, and a cat-and-mouse game between the governor's top bodyguards and Ogami ensues, with several spaghetti western-style set pieces.

The most shocking of these has Daigoro befriend a pistolero, and then luring the gunman away from his precious weapons to save the "drowning" boy. The water is not really deep, although the pistolero is in over his head, facing the sword-wielding Ogami. Such a dishonorable ruse from a man of honor is puzzling to the western mind.

The final battle-- in which Lone Wolf faces off an entire army, utilizing not only his swords but smoke grenades and baby-cart-mounted guns and armor--pushes the carnage to preposterous yet somehow believable levels. When the battlefield is littered with bodies and parts thereof, the ronin from earlier in the film reappears for one last showdown with Ogami.

In a unlikely yet moving sequence, the now fatally wounded ronin spends his final moments asking for Ogami's sanction for a supposed dishonorable action the ronin once took, in protecting his lord. In light of this same ronin's earlier actions, killing the raped women, this seems patently absurd; and yet it is moving when Ogami gives his blessing, and consents to act as the ronin's *Kashakunin*, decapitating the tortured samurai after *sappuku* [harakiri].

Stylishly directed by Buchi Sato, *BABY CART #4: HEART OF A PARENT... HEART OF A CHILD* pits Ogami against another female assassin, the lethal, lovely, elaborately tattooed Oyuki. But in a reversal of *BABY CART #2*, Ogami this time is trailing the woman-- she is his paid victim. His search for her makes *HEART OF A PARENT* resemble a private-eye movie, and with its rain and fog and steam, *HEART* is the most noir-ish entry in the series.

In a particularly compelling sequence, Daigoro is separated from his father; as the boy wanders in the rain, an understated, poetic narration tells us what the boy is thinking-- the device, so frequent in Kojika's comic-book scripts, seems startling in the film, but effective. Daigoro-- with his battle-hardened gaze--attracts the attention of Gunbei Yamuse, a wandering samurai.

Gunbei is the son of Ogami's arch enemy Resudo Yagyu, in a sanctioned duel with Ito Ogami, in the presence of the Shogun, Gunbei had been maneuvered by Ogami to seem to be threatening the Shogun with his sword. The disgrace was at the root of the Yagyu feud with Ito Ogami, and the wild-haired white-maned elder Yagyu commanded a lookalike of

Gunbei's to commit *sappuku* in the son's place, thereby condemning Gunbei to wander as a "dead man."

At any rate, when Gunbei happens upon the lost Daigoro, he recognizes the boy as Lone Wolf's cub, he even watches as the boy is trapped by a fire in a burning field. Unafraid, the boy merely digs himself a hole to hide inside. (Brilliant Chinese filmmaker John Woo re-staged the scene-- with a few improvements-- in *HEROES SHED NO TEARS*, his modern-day homage to *LONE WOLF AND CHILD*. Whether Woo was paying tribute to the film or the comic-book source material is unknown, as the sequence of the resourceful boy in the burning field appears both places.)

Gunbei is about to kill the boy when Ogami and his now-empty baby cart tumble onto the bridge where the child is defending himself with a stick held like a sword. Though he defeats Gunbei, Ogami refuses to kill the man-- because he is already "dead."

Private-eye-like Ogami learns that Oyuki, the female assassin, is the talented, skilled daughter of the leader of a community of theatrical performers and street musicians. The father regrets having his daughter go down the assassin's road and condones and, sadly, even approves of Ogami's mission. Ogami meets the woman at the spring of truth, witnesses her skills as she dispatches several would-be killers, and learns that she has become an assassin only after a trusted teacher raped her. Again, author Kojika views rape as a horrible crime, in response, Oyuki has desecrated her own perfect body with ugly tattoos, designed to distract her foes when she exposes her breasts-- and these foul images.

Ogami allows her to engage, and defeat, that teacher in battle before facing her himself, allowing her to die with dignity, breasts unbarred, "a lady." When Ogami pays his respects to the father of the girl he has just killed, bringing him her ashes in an urn, the dignified elder refuses to betray Ogami's presence to his enemies, echoing Ogami protecting the young prostitute-to-be in *BABY CART #3*. In doing this, the father dies to atone for his daughter's sins.

The final brawl-- brutal, even for this series-- pits Ogami against another horde of soldiers, as well as Resudo Yagyu himself, finally, the arch enemy seems a worthy foe, and when Ogami takes eye-for-an-eye justice, it's literal: the elder Yagyu survives, but in the future, he'll wear an eyepatch.

Surveying the landscape of carnage, Gunbei wanders onto the scene, promising to one day kill Ogami himself; unfortunately, the promise of a re-match between these near-equal opponents is one the series does not pay off. Gunbei does not reappear. In *BABY CART #6*, in fact, the elder Yagyu refers to Gunbei's death (which DOES occur in the comic-book version).

Director Kanji Mizumi is back for arguably the best film of the series: *BABY CART #8: TREAD LIGHTLY ON THE PATH TO HELL*. Five challengers confront Ogami, giving him partial payment and a piece of his assignment and the story behind it-- but only after he has defeated them. One challenger, on fire after having

taken into a campfire when Ogami mortally slashes him, imparts his information as he burns; another defeated messenger makes his dying speech in a river while the water reddens around him. Gradually, Ogami kills off each messenger and gets the full story; he is to save a clan's honor by murdering its royal family!

The senile, half-mad clan leader has substituted a young girl (passed as a boy) for the male heir he never had. A document revealing the deception must not reach enemy hands—specifically, those of Ogami's arch enemy, Retsudo Yagyu. In the midst of increasingly complicated political intrigue, Ogami encounters a female martial artist, Shiranuri, representing the Kuroda clan members who have hired him; in one of the strangest moments in the series (and that's saying something!) Shiranuri—on the roof of the temple where Ogami and Daigoro are hiding out—asks the assassin to hold the recovered incriminating document below her. She proceeds to erase it with her urine.

BABY CART #3 is easily the most complexly plotted of the series, yet still strewn with elaborate battle sequences. But the highlight of this rich film is a set-piece in which Daigoro—briefly separated from his father—is handed a stolen wallet by a lovely pickpocket on-the-run at a crowded street fair. The fetching female thief asks Daigoro to "promise" not to say where he got the wallet. When the boy is captured, and given a public beating in the town square, he refuses to break his promise—even after the weeping thief comes forward and gives him permission!

From the audience, his father watches—and the viewer may expect the Lone Wolf to intercede for his cub, and kick major butt, but no. He watches stoically as his son takes a beating he doesn't deserve, the child is learning to maintain honor in the face of injustice.

When Daigoro wins the hearts and respect of his captors and the crowd, and is released, he goes to his father, who the boy knows witnessed the beating. Typically, they speak nothing of it—but the father's hand slips into the boy's as they rumble out of town, the boy walking alongside his father, not riding. No longer a baby.

Daigoro does respond as a child when he and his father finally reach the royal courtroom, and the boy makes goo-goo faces with the other cute kid in the room: the five-year-old "prince" who is really a princess. The two kids are having a good time, until Ogami confronts the court with its sexual masquerade, and the five-year-old "prince" chips: "Kill them."

Ogami's final battle is within the castle, as he dispatches a horde of troops, some of who were probably in on hiring him to make this assault. As he and Daigoro roll away from this, their most monstrous mission, Kenji Maumi's camera first records Ogami's dead-eyed expression before dropping down to the child's identical one. Father and son have become one on the road to Meikumachi.

If the final entry in the series, BABY CART #6 DAIGORO! WE'RE GOING INTO HELL!, is something of a disappointment, it is none-the-less rewarding. The series seems to be building to a climax, and both Ogami and his ach-too Yagyu speak of this being the final confrontation both have been waiting for.

There is a simple reason why it isn't astonishing as it seems, the entire six-film series was made in a two-year period, 1972-73. Koike and Kojima's manga version was still being published, the comic book HAS a conclusion, a final confrontation between Ogami and the elder Yagyu—but that conclusion would not be written, drawn and published until 1978.

In 1973, a Japanese television version of KOZURE OKAMI began, with different actors (Jinnosuke Yorigayasu as Ogami, Katsumasa Nishikawa as Daigoro) and without Koike's participation as writer. The series has its defenders, but judging by the only sample currently available (released in America by Sony/Thornt)—a dubbed TV movie entitled FUGITIVE SAMURAI, apparently the plot and a fairly faithful if bloodless (in every sense of the word) adaptation of Ogami's origin—it is far inferior to the films. But apparently the TV series was high profile enough to bring the popular movie series to an end.

Or perhaps Akihiro Tomikawa had outgrown his role, and pairing Wakayama with another child is unthinkable.

So, unsatisfying a conclusion as it may be, BABY CART #6 is the conclusion we have. All five previous films featured music by Hidenori Sakurai, who skillfully combines stately orchestral scores with traditional Japanese wind instruments, occasionally getting brashly jazzy, with the persuasive Lone Wolf theme itself



approaching rock-n-roll. But *BABY CART #6* has an intrusive, anachronistic score by Kunihiko Murai, heavy on brass and SHAFT-like weh-weh pedal guitar. It's an off-putting element in an otherwise entertaining, action-oriented film.

The elder Yagyu sends his daughter Kaori—a better fighter than her late brothers, he assures his refusal—to kill Ogami. This is the third time we've seen Ogami face a female "samurai," and though the sequence is well-staged, we've been down this road before; Ogami even repeats the trick of putting Daigoro on his shoulders, wearing a reflective mirror.

Having run out of children to send to kill Ogami, Retsudo Yagyu tries to enlist the bastard child of his late wife, the bastard, Hyosui, rejects his stepfather's pleas, and sets out to kill Ogami for the glory of his own clan, the Chichin family.

Three of Hyosui's warriors, the Shininogi, have endured a ritual of living underground for forty-some days; their powers approach the supernatural, and they can burrow beneath the earth like snakes. They begin a campaign of psychological warfare on Ogami, informing him that they will kill any innocent person he and his son might encounter—an innocent candy vendor, a friendly innkeeper. Soon the assassin and son are leaving a trail of carnage behind them—but not of their own creation, for a change.

Director Soji Kuroda creates a nicely spooky atmosphere; in this, the most overtly supernatural of the series, seeing Ogami unsettled is unnerving indeed, although the character's innate goodness—despite his assassin persona—comes through as he and Daigoro attempt to live without human contact, to prevent further innocents from harm.

When the snake-like Shininogi have Ogami trapped, pulling him down under the ground, the Lone Wolf challenges the bastard Hyosui to fight him like a true samurai. Hyosui's ego requires him to accept, and Ogami is, of course, the victor.

Ogami does grant Hyosui a last request—the dying warrior is allowed to ride home to "see his sister" Azusa (also born out of wedlock) one last time; Hyosui's idea

of "seeing" his sister is to pull her naked from her steaming bath and climb aboard her, urging her to have his son, saying: "Travel quickly, my sperm!" Hyosui wants his sister to continue the Chichin line, not the Yagyu.

As brother and sister are locked in carnal embrace, the elder Yagyu enters and seizes them both, dismissing the bearded Hyosui as "an ass" who botched the opportunity to kill Ogami by insisting on behaving in an honorable, sexual fashion.

(As if all were not brain-frying enough, in the manga version, Retsudo Yagyu—his legitimate sons and daughter dead—had been planning to impregnate Azusa himself—his own bastard daughter! This may explain Hyosui's wish to impregnate her first.)

Ogami, pursued by the late Hyosui's trio of living-dead-like minions, retreats to a wintry climate, where the snow and frozen earth renders their burrowing-beneath-the-ground "trick" ineffective; he slays them, and in a visually stunning snowy setting, engages in a massive battle with the elder Yagyu and his man. The baby cart has been turned into a sled, and the samurai's are on skis as well, in a nicely-staged but gimmicky finale.

When the elder Yagyu makes his weaselly escape, after all his and Ogami's talk of their "final" battle, genuine frustration sets in. But the film's closing moments—when a concerned Ogami searches in the snow for his child—is suitably moving; the boy, bundled in a straw snowsuit, waddles like a cute zombie into the open arms of his loving, battle-scarred father.

The last lines we hear them speak are "Father?" and "Daigoro?"

Thanks to Terry Beatty, Gary Kato and Vernon Grant for insights into *Kôke* and *Kôjin*'s marketplace of comic art. Sources for this article included *The Samurai Files* (updated 1983 edition), Allan Silver; *From Bruce Lee To The Ninja - Martial Arts Movies* (1985), Ric Meyers, Amy Harbo, Bill and Karen Palmer, with special thanks to Bill Palmer. And, of course, Tom Wassner and Video Search of Miami for the incredible English translated versions of the complete series, without those tapes—this article would have been impossible.

## VIDEO SEARCH OF MIAMI

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# VIDEO GIRL AI

by Jim McLennan

Welcome to ATC's first column on Japanese animation. Columnist Jim McLennan is a British critic with his finger on the pulse of the "anime" scene.

Japanese animation has, perhaps understandably, become linked in many people's minds with excess: icky, multi-tentacled beings raping schoolgirls, Tokyo getting flattened by psychic juvenile delinquents, you know the sort of thing. However, this is really only tiny part of the anime scene; the spectrum ranges from shows like "Urutsuki Doji," all the way to the ultra-cute "Sailor Moon" (the latter kind, incidentally, are far more popular in Japan - tentacles are definitely a minority interest). In the middle are a lot of series which have perhaps not received the coverage they deserve. In this column, I hope to shine a little light on some of these, starting with the rather strange VIDEO GIRL AI.

The basic principle is simple, if slightly sleazy. The hero, Youta Mabeuchi, can't bring himself to declare his love for Moemi, as she loves his friend Takashi. On his way home after a particularly dismal attempt to do so, he stumbles across the mysterious Gokureku (= "Paradise") video shop where he rents a "video date" tape - we'll gloss over how he plans to use - but gets more than he bargained for, as the girl on the tape comes through the screen and into his life. Things are never the same again.

This may sound vaguely like SPLASH, but the video girl, Ai (the Japanese word for "love") is rather more worldly-wise than her "owner." Beneath a facade of snow-white virginity, is a slutty streak several yards wide; her first words after coming to life are "You asshole! Why did you play the tape on a broken VCR?" But she has a heart of gold, and sticks firmly to her appointed task of "comforting" Youta. This has both good and bad points - bath time is fun and dinner isn't (Ai's cooking is awful) - and is also pretty chaotic as Ai decides she is going to get Youta and Moemi together.

Of course, things don't go as planned. How do you explain to the girl of your dreams about the babe who has just moved in? Simple: she's your younger sister. The problem is that Ai only has a month on Earth before she's due back, I dread to think what the penalty is for a late video girl.

On this level VIDEO GIRL AI comes over as a cross between PORKY'S and the aforementioned SPLASH, and indeed, for the first four episodes, it can be enjoyed purely on this level.

The first episode is raunchy comedy, the third more straight-forwardly humorous, while the second and fourth episodes are drama-oriented - one of the advantages of separate OAV (Original Animation Video) is that different parts can have contrasting styles without

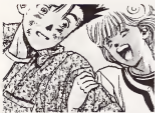
it jarring too badly. Admittedly, the dramatic sections work less well, simply because anime has less obvious advantages over live-action in this area.

By the end of Part four, Moemi has started going out with Takashi, who's only really doing it as a favor to Youta, who just wants Moemi to be happy. Meanwhile, Ai is slowly falling in love with Youta, charmed by his compassion and altruism. If this sounds like a soap opera, you're not far wrong, though it's better done than you might expect.

However, I was wondering whether AI was little more than another "Kimagure Orange Road", a successful anime series based around a love triangle that spawned some entertaining OAV's, a wonderfully depressing movie and no fewer than 48 TV episodes in which nothing of significance happened.

In the final two OAVs, however, VIDEO GIRL AI gets deeply bizarre. In part five, Ai's time is running out and she starts to suffer fits. Youta is busy, so doesn't notice, and Ai tries to keep them from him, but they get worse.





and she eventually collapses in an alley, under the gaze of a mysterious stranger who turns out to be Koto, her creator. Youta eventually realizes Ai has vanished and goes out looking for her. However, she has been "recalled" for falling in love, the one thing absolutely forbidden to video girls. After the light and fluffy tone of the preceding episodes, this is somber stuff.

Part six is possibly the most intensely acid-faced thirty minutes of anime I've seen. Ai is permitted a brief return to Youta, to say good-bye, but when she is sucked into the TV for the last time, he follows and finds himself in a nightmarish series of video realities. First he meets Takashi in an urban sprawl, who tells him to give up Ai, and says there's nothing she does Moemi can't do just as well. He is also told that until he makes up his mind, he will see neither of them.

The city collapses in on itself, hurling Youta into a bizarre rural scene, which looks like it's been carved out of ice-cream (raspberry apple). Here, Moemi offers herself to him, and tries to convince him love is just the product of circumstance. He resists and again the landscape crumbles.

This time he finds himself at the foot of a glass staircase, at the top of which is Ai, crucified with video leads (I don't think we're in soap-opera land anymore, Toto). Youta's progress up the stairs is slow and painful as it shatters with every step, diving splinters of glass into his feet and forcing him to crawl up it instead - which just means his entire body gets shredded instead. If you winced at Bruce Willis in *DIE HARD*, you will love this sequence. Koto appears, he's created the whole scene as a sadistic metaphor: "The frailty, the pain, the uncertainty - that is your love . . . You don't know when the stairway will disappear. It is not even certain that it leads to Ai."

Youta is not swayed (c'mon, you expected him to say "Well, you have a point there?") and Koto, impressed by Youta's faith, relents. Or does he? The ending is distinctly ambivalent. It seems that Ai is returned to the real world, but her last words are "I can disappear without any regrets because even though it was only for a short time, I was able to believe in love."

On balance, I'd favor the happy ending, as the six OAVs represent a fraction of Katsura Mutsakazu's manga covering roughly the first three books in the

thirteen volume series. This compaction is a common feature of many anime series - for example, John Musker's "Outlanders" was crunched from over 1500 pages into a single forty-five minute film.

One interesting thing to note is that it's another case of an anime series where the protagonists are still in school. This occurs far more frequently than in Western animated movies, where you'll only see it in films targeted at that age-group. In Japan, they crop up all over the place, from the highly popular *RANMA* and *URUSEI YATSURA* TV series to the fantastic silliness of *HIGH SCHOOL INVASION* and of course, *URUTSUO DOJI*.

The main reason for this may lie in the strict conformity inherent in Japanese society, as school is one of the few places where some measure of individuality is permissible. While in most cases this is unlikely to extend beyond wearing an unapproved color of hair-ribbon or shirt, it does mean school is one of the few plausible habitats for anime's more outrageous characters. Cho-ji would not survive a day in one of Japan's mega-corporations.

Admittedly, the Ai manga was targeted at teenage boys, despite its adult theme and treatment: the OAVs would be 'R'-rated here for sexual content, and possibly language. Indeed, parts 3 & 5 of the manga had the nudity toned down when they were reprinted, after complaints - the main modification was the addition of panties to Ai in several scenes!

But, it gathered a cult following anyway, breaking out to reach a far wider audience. The manga began in early 1991, and was so popular that within six months, a live-action version (which as yet I've not been able to track down) was created. The six anime OAVs followed in early 1992.

#### AI-OGRAPHY

Manga: 15 volumes of "Dan in Shōjo" (Video Girl). 13 Video Girl Ai, and 2 more of "Video Girl Len", set further on in the future, though Youta still makes the odd cameo appearance (Like Ai, Len or Ren also means "love" in Japanese).

Anime: six 30 minutes OAVs. Available on 3 laser discs. Victor Entertainment.



# ATC LASER DISC GUIDE

BY FORREST BATSON

\*\*\*\*\* Demonstration Quality

\*\*\*\* Excellent Sound/Picture Quality

\*\*\* Good Disc but has flaws

\*\* Below Average

\* Bad Pressing, Poor Quality Sound and Picture

## DR. LAMB (1992)

Disc Quality \*\*

This star Entertainment disc was released in March of 93. It is letterboxed at 1.85:1 on side one and 1.75:1 on side 2. It has Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog tracks. On side one there are audio beeps at 10 minute intervals on the Cantonese track only. These are very annoying! Side 2 was clear of this defect and the overall picture quality is clear. Cover art features covering female victims and Simon Yam with chainsaw and doctor's outfit. The flip-side has a posed shot of Yam with rubber body parts. Note: this disc has no subtitles. List price is \$95.

## HEROIC TRIO (1992)

Disc Quality \*\*

This 2-disc set is a big letdown. It has Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog tracks and is letterboxed at approximately 1.85:1. All 4 sides are in the CAV format and 2 out of 5 still frames are unsteady. Side one is plagued by scratches and breaks with some scenes resembling a work print! Side 2 has a terrible side break that interrupts an action sequence. Overall the picture is blurry, faded and leaves a lot to be desired. On the plus side, the jacket features 2 different posed shots of the three leads as well as other nice stills. List price is \$190.

## LAST HERO IN CHINA (1993)

Disc Quality \*\*

This release features Cantonese/analog tracks only. The letterbox matte changes from 1.85:1 to 1.75:1 throughout the transfer. Side one has a few breaks, minor scratches, and a poorly chosen side break right in the middle of a great fight scene! Side 2 is plagued by scratches, especially during the end sequence which is a burned mess. The English subtitles are clear and easy to read. Eye-catching cover artwork has a 3-D like pose shot of Jet Li and Cheung Man. List price is \$90.

## ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA 2 (1992)

Disc Quality \*\*\*

This 2-disc set has a running time of 112 minutes and is on three sides in CLV. The sound is Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog. It has Chase-surround stereo sound and the result is a vast improvement over Mono releases. Before the film are 3 trailers including POLICE STORY III and THE MASTER. The letterbox matte is 1.9:1 and retains most of the 2.35:1 framing. A couple of

night scenes are washed out and there are a few minor scratches, but the rest of the transfer is very nice. Each jacket features different photos on the front and back. Note: This set has no English subtitles.

## RAPED BY AN ANGEL (1993)

Disc Quality \*\*

NAKED KILLER fans will no doubt want to check out this new Chingmy Yau film from Wong Jing Productions. Unfortunately, they will discover that all the major sex scenes have been trimmed. It's letterboxed at about 1.85:1 with Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog tracks. The subtitles are faded and hard to read for the first 10 minutes and there are 5 breaks on side one. There are audio beeps at 32 and 40 minutes to censor language on the Cantonese track only. List price: \$110.

## ROYAL TRAMP (1992)

Disc Quality \*\*\*\*

At the start of this CAV 2-disc set are trailers for ARREST THE RESTLESS and an exciting one for ROYAL TRAMP 2 (the latter you should skip until you've seen that film). It has Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog audio tracks. The letterbox ratio changes from side to side but averages 1.75:1. Some indoor scenes are grainy and the first 3 minutes of side 4 are very scratched and faded. The rest of the transfer is good without any major problems. Two out of five still frames are unsteady on all 4 sides. List price is \$190.

## ROYAL TRAMP 2 (1992)

Disc Quality \*\*

This 2-disc CAV set has Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog tracks. It is not letterboxed and there is picture information missing from the top as well as the sides. Some of the scenes are faded and the side one break runs a joke. Two out of five still frames are unsteady. The jackets feature shots of all the stars.

## SWORDSMAN 2 (1993)

Disc Quality \*\*\*\*

An excellent release from Cineme City! This disc has Cantonese/digital and Mandarin/analog audio tracks. The Japanese segments are in Japanese on both audio tracks. A bright, clean transfer with only 2 breaks and a brief out-of-focus shot. One of the best pressings of the year! The letterbox matte is 1.85:1. Jacket art features Lin Ching Hsieh on front and back covers.



# YAKUZA:

## LOSERS ON PARADE (Part III) a continuing filography by Chris D.

**JINGINAKI TATAKAI (WAR OF THE GAMBLING CODE)** 1973 99 Min. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku w/Bunta Sugawara, Hiroki Matsukata, Nobuo Kaneko, Tatsuo Umemiya. This Yakuza film is probably the most critically acclaimed film of its type. Bunta plays his usual homicidal salt, however he's a bit more restrained and wise in the ways of the clan than the characters he routinely plays. Hiroki plays a young, greedy, murderously ambitious mover. The film ends with Bunta going to the funeral of one of the bosses – a situation notorious for being one of the times most used in these films as an excuse for a massacre – and when everyone sees him, folks go for their swords, knives and revolvers. They freak even more when he pulls out his pistol. But, amazingly enough, he shoots up the photos, banners and flowers on the dead guy's altar – symbolically killing the idea of jingi (honorable ethics of the gambler's code), exposing it as the lie it is. #1 in the series. \*\*\* VHS=Toei. There were 9 films in this series.

**JINGINAKI TATAKAI - HIROSHIMA SHITOUHEN (WAR OF A GAMBLER'S CODE - STORY OF THE HIROSHIMA**

**FACTION)** 1973 100 Min. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku w/Bunta Sugawara, Kinjo Kikou, Meiko Kaji, Shimichi 'Sonny' Chiba, Asao Koike. The first sequel that would establish the m.o. for the rest of the series. Throughout about a third of the film, Bunta is a passionless observer to a younger, more fucked up guy who gets caught up in the whole honorable gangster bullshit. Bunta watched him get exploited by the bosses and then discarded or killed when their usefulness is outlived. He spends the balance of the film exacting revenge. #2 in the series. \*\*\* VHS=Toei.

**SHIN JINGINAKI TATAKAI (NEW WAR OF THE GAMBLER'S CODE)** 1974 98 Min. Dir. Kinji Fukasaku w/Bunta Sugawara, Hiroki Matsukata, Tomisaburo Wakayama, Tsumehiko Wabase. Bunta starts things with a hit on an opposing boss, then has to hide out in a deserted, freezing warehouse. He also may be addicted to meth so he's not as wise as the character in the preceding films (therefore the word SHIN or new in the title). He's in and out of prison during the opening credits. Wakayama is stupendous as usual as a cold-

blooded opportunist boor who starts murdering his way to the top. #8 in the series. \*\*\*½ VHS=Toei

**JITSUROKU ANDOGUMI (AUTHENTIC RECORD OF THE ANDO GANG)** 1973 Dir. Junya Sato w/ Noboru Ando, Tatsuro Tamba. Noboru starts from scratch with school chums and army buddies and builds his business and Yakuza clan simultaneously. Noboru goes to the hospital where his wife is having a baby. The power goes out because of a windstorm and his wife gives birth to a baby by candle light. There's some really moving stuff where rough, tough formally emotionally-introverted Noboru smiles down at his wife, picks up their baby and cradles it in the candle light. The next morning he heads to work, joins his friends as they set up a barricade, dig out their weapons and wait for an attack from a giant force of Yakuza oppositional forces bent on swallowing their business. #1 in the series. \*\*\*½ VHS=Toei

**JITSUROKU ANDOGUMI - SHUGENKI HEN (AUTHENTIC RECORD OF THE ANDO GANG - STORY OF ATTACK)** 1973 95 Min. Dir. Junya Sato w/Noboru Ando, Tatsuro Umemiya, Tatsuro Tamba. Despite this being second in a two-film series, Noboru and Tamba's characters are unrelated to those in the first film. The plot-line involves a bunch of Yakuza guys getting together to pull a huge heist. From a story by Ando (an ex-Yakuza himself). #2 in the series. \*\*\* VHS=Toei

**JITSUROKU GAIDEN - OSAKA DENGOKI SAKU (HARVEST OF OSAKA BY ELECTRIC SHOCK - AUTHENTIC RECORD)** 1978 95 Min. Dir. Sadao Nakajima w/ Hiroki Matsukata, Tsunehiko Watake, Tatsuro Umemiya, Akira Kobayashi, Tatsuro Tamba. Gang war with Hiroki's boisterous drunken pal Watake, kidnaped by a rival gang and traded for a hostage. Umemiya. Guys get cooked to death in oil drums, fires erupt and cars explode, just a normal night in Osaka. \*\*\* VHS=Toei

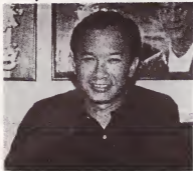
**JITSUROKU GINZAKEI (AUTHENTIC RECORD OF GINZA DISTRICT TORTURES)** 1973 94 Min. Dir. Junya Sato w/ Noboru Ando, Tatsuro Umemiya, Tsunehiko Watake, Kyosuke Machida. Post-WW2 saga of returning soldiers – their cynical, brutal-do-anything-to-survive savagery, building up to a dog-eat-dog, grass-roots capitalist society where the only ethics are stab-the-next-guy-in-the-back-before-he-does-it-to-you. Watake plays a returning soldier gone mad who has killed his wife and her mulatto baby and is then used by an evil methedrine/mack pusher to knock off various folks who get in his way. Has some of the sickest imagery I have ever seen in a commercial film, but this indictment by way of allegory condemning capitalist Japan's lack of human values contains some of the most potent visual juxtaposition ever. A corrupt businessman kidnaped by the gang is tortured with boiling grease from a frying pan and accidentally killed. In a panic, the 'loveable' protagonists dump his corpse in a pigpen and we witness the hogs dining on pieces of his meaty carcass.

Later, when Umemiya and the rest are cavorting in an orgy at a high priced Ginza area whorehouse, throwing their ransom money all around the room, passing bills to the sweetly, fornicating bodies, the completely insane Watake – a hollow-eyed barely in control killing machine – retires to the bathroom to shoot up. He's gone too long without a fix and is shaking so badly he can barely get it together. Suddenly he starts vomiting prodigious amounts of blood, literally geysers of the stuff until his body is left drained. Violently disturbing. I'd say it was a masterpiece if not for the fact that Toei loves to exploit gore and sex – and when they saw how far Sato's scathing attack was going, I'm sure they were ecstatic, but not for any 'uplifting' reasons. \*\*\*½ VHS=Toei

**JOSHUU 701 GOU - SASORI (SHE PRISONER #701)** 1973 87 Min. Dir. Toshiya Ito. W/ Meiko Kaji, Hiroki Ogi, Fumio Watanabe, Yayoi Watanabe. Incredibly satisfying and beautifully photographed women's prison film. Our heroine is lovely, strong, principled and honorable and decent – at least when compared to her fellow inmates. The basic premise of the tale – and of the series – is Meiko Kaji as wronged women/fanatical avenger raining wrath down on the heads of various Yakuza cruds, decadent lovers and vindictive fellow prisoners. This pic has it all as far as traditional exploitation elements with a surreal comic-book use of color and a nearly mythical/archetypal take on characters and images that leave a haunting, eerie shiver when the last frame unspools. #1 in a series of 6 films. \*\*\*½ VHS=Toei

**KANTO HIZAKURE IKKA (KANTO ACTRESS' CLAN)** 1972 102 Min. Dir. Masahiro Makino w/ Junko Fujii, Ken Takakura, Koji Tsuruta, Bunta Sugawara, Tomosaburo Wakayama. Junko is a Gisha/Gambler in 20's Japan who not only sings traditional songs but presides over gambling sessions for the 'good' Yakuza clan. When she's provoked and insulted by a couple of bad guys, a test of skill involving her harp/blade and the bad guy's sword causes him to lose face. Soon after, one of the heads of her clan is murdered. Thus, the dominos start to fall. Junko's beau, Ken, a walking with her the night after the funeral when they're set upon by the bad clan's toughs. Ken fights them off and accidentally kills one. He disappears as relations between the two clans continue to deteriorate. Junko and Ken finish off the whole rotten bunch in a protracted battle that pretty much sums up the pattern for other films of this ilk such as the **NIHON KYOKAKUDEN** series. In fact, Junko's character seems like the prototype for her **HIBOTAN BAKUTO (WOMAN GAMBLER)** character – except this was produced after the last film in that series. In fact, this was her last film before retiring to get married! This is a perfect example of the more traditional Yakuza film. Program filler elevated to blood ritual status – despite these particular Yakuza films having very little to do with present reality (that goes for past reality as well). I still prefer them slightly over the more ultra-cruel, amoral anti-hero films set in the post-war period. \*\*\*\* VHS=Toei

# PAINT IT RED: TWO INTERVIEWS with JOHN WOO



**John Woo Interview #1**  
conducted by John Martin  
with occasional interjections by  
Terence Chang

**John Woo Interview #2**  
conducted by Mark Savage  
with the assistance of  
Frank Bren and Terence Chang

*John, the image that keeps reoccurring in your movies is that of a gun held against someone's head . . . even when it's not happening to Chow Yun Fat in A BETTER TOMORROW, he's talking about it, and in BULLET IN THE HEAD it even happens to a skull . . .*

Yeah (laughs).

*Is this some kind of a metaphor for the way Hong Kong people feel about the advent of 1997?*

Maybe subconsciously it's related to 1997, but mostly it's a personal thing. I want that particular image to signify my unwillingness to yield to any pressure, whether it's political or social.

*To show the world you won't compromise.*

Yeah.

*What battles did you fight to get A BETTER TOMORROW to the screen?*

Comedies and kung fu films dominated Hong Kong cinema in the mid-eighties. Other genres rarely got the support of the studio and the audience. And also, right before A BETTER TOMORROW, I shot two films in Taiwan (RUN, TIGER, RUN and HEROES SHED NO TEARS) and they were commercially unsuccessful, so it seemed quite impossible for me to make the films I really wanted to make. Both Tsui Hark and myself felt that Hong Kong at that time was seriously lacking in moral values (1985). Young people were very lost and trust toward the government was shaken. So I wanted to make an uplifting film to highlight the lost traditional values including the values of family, friendship, tolerance, etc. So I decided to remake a sixties film (TRUE COLORS OF A HERO directed by Lung Kong) and that became A BETTER TOMORROW.

[continued on page 39]

[continued on page 41]

## [John Woo Interview #1: continued]

The term that has been coined to describe your movies is "Heroic Bloodshed" .... Do you like that term?

Oh yes! (Laughs)

People talk about the influence on your work of Jean-Pierre Melville, Martin Scorsese, Sergio Leone, etc, but when I watch your films, the obvious comparison that occurs to me is with Paul Schrader.

Really?

Yeah, all that stuff about the spirit being built up while the body is being ripped apart

Ah well, he and I are of the same religion, Lutheran.

In *A BETTER TOMORROW* Chow Yun Fat says that a man who can control his destiny becomes a God

Yeah

Is that consistent with your Christianity?

Well, I dunno ... but that's my theory any way!

You're known for the scale and intricacy of your action sequences, and yet I read somewhere that you never use story-boards ... it's hard to believe

Oh yes, in Hong Kong I never used a story-board, everything is in my mind ... I have a very good assistant and the crew are very used to working with me, so we have a very good understanding, they all realize what I need, so even though we shoot a big action sequence, usually I only tell them the general idea, and it's all done on instinct I do whatever I feel like doing, no worries because I'm in total control of every shot I feel like I'm a painter, usually I will shoot everything by feeling, by the mood I'm very moody ... in fact, crazy! (Laughs)

Was it difficult to emerge as an auteur, a strong directorial figure in the Western sense, in Hong Kong cinema? The impression we get over here is that several people have a big say in the making of a Hong Kong movie, different people direct sequences in one film, etc

Actually I had a lot of freedom in Hong Kong, because in Hong Kong there are two main genres, action and comedy. Within those two limits, I have total freedom in creating my own material ... unless I touch on sensitive political issues, I can't get away with doing that!

Perhaps you've had more problems in Hollywood *HARD TARGET* had what ... eight producers?

Nine, actually! I didn't expect the problems I got, and I didn't get used to the Hollywood system. There are too many people interfering with the creative side, and I didn't have script approval, so I couldn't do exactly what I wanted ... sometimes I wanted to make some changes, but in Hollywood they're really keen on making sure the project doesn't go over budget, so I have a great idea and want to put it in the movie but what they say is that you're not allowed to go over budget, and also

(Pause)

(Terence Chang interrupts): I think aside from the budget problem, the studios want total control because they want film-makers to conform, they are not comfortable with new ideas and new ways of doing things, which makes for difficulties....

(John Woo): Yes, yes ... and there is also so much concern about the ratings. Before the shooting I had been advised to turn down the violence, the bullets and the body counts (laughs). So sometimes I feel like I've been restricted by these rules and all these pressures, but I still very much appreciate the studio, the crew and actors, film makers in Hollywood for great help and support

Especially the crew, I must say, are much more professional and dedicated, and the actors are so much more passionate about making a good movie than in Hong Kong, where I also have plenty of good talent, but most of the crew just come to work for the money, not the ideas, and most of the crew weren't educated in film, they just learned on the job ... so that's the difference

Are there any other Hong Kong directors who you feel could cross over to the Hollywood way of making movies? Ringo Lam, for instance?

Oh yes, there a lot of good talents in Hong Kong (Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark, and many others, all very good directors

Was Sam Raimi a supportive Producer for you?

Sam was very kind and very helpful. He gave me great support and helped find a very good crew and also very good actors. He said that he was an admirer of THE KILLER, which I really appreciated.

So many of the young Hollywood directors have expressed an admiration of your work ... are you aware of the "Woo style" catching on there?

Well, they have their own style and their own special qualities ... I don't think they're copying me. It's an honor to have this kind of friendship, I just feel like I have so many friends and I appreciate that we have so many things in common ... Terence and I learn so much from them too.

(Terence Chang): John had made several successful Hong Kong films, and was at the point in his career where he wanted to break out, experience something new and learn more. Since *THE KILLER* got so much attention in Hollywood, they were all very much interested in asking him to bring his style to an American movie, and he got offers from over 21 studios in Hollywood.

He was glad to have the opportunity to put the themes from his movies into an American film and see how it works.

*Are there any Western actors who you feel would fit well into a John Woo movie?*

(John Woo): Yeah, basically I'd like to work with any good actors, but I particularly dream of working with Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel, Daniel Day-Lewis . . .

*What are the new projects you're working on now?*

We have several. Terence Chang, Sam Rami and Robert Tapert will produce an action/suspense film, a "syndicate" (gangster) story. It will be the first of my films to have a heroine . . . a female cop and a male cop together against terrorists. After that I also have a project with Quentin Tarantino, he and his partner Lawrence Bender, and Terence are going to produce it, he's writing a script for me and we've got so much interest to bring Chow Yun Fat to Hollywood and have him star in

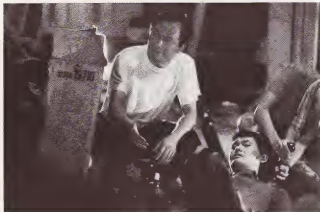
an American style film. So Chow's taking classes, he English is very much improved.

*Chow Yun Fat's screen persona is legendary, but what's he like in real life?*

Oh, a really wonderful guy! He's very dedicated and we have so many things in common, the same feelings, approach, and thinking. He really cares, you know? Off screen he's very quiet, very normal. . . . Instead of shooting people, he loves to help people!

*Now that you're making movies in Hollywood, will you ever return to Hong Kong?*

Yes, yes, I will definitely return, because I love Hong Kong and I miss it. I've learned more in Hollywood, I got more experience, and after I've made a few more American films I will go back to Hong Kong to make more films. Also, I plan to make a movie in China, I'm planning on making an epic. Also, I wish I could bring Western talents over and combine them with Chinese ones to make a real good movie. I hope I can make the film like *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA*, I'd like to take that challenge since I admire David Lean so much. . . . That kind of movie is everybody's dream, but you need so much support and so much experience and courage to make it. I feel grateful that I've had so much support from critics and journalists, like yourself. I appreciate the friendship and support for my movies and all Hong Kong films . . . and the Hong Kong film industry needs you!



John Woo (L) with Chow Yun Fat on set of *Hard-Boiled*

[John Woo interview #2; continued from pg 38]

Tsui Hark, who also shared my ideal in improving the quality of Hong Kong cinema, supported me in making this film. When writing and making the film, I submerged my own emotions in the character of "Mark" (Chow Yun Fat) and the emotions of Mark become raw and real, and the audience responded to him. So Mark became a hero. I designed the gun battles and all the action sequences myself by combining elements from Western and Chinese swordplay movies. They became something new and exciting, and that contributed to the film's success, I guess.

*There is some very interesting cross-referencing of story-lines and characters in your films. In A BETTER TOMORROW, Mark relates a story to Ti Lung and Weiss Lee in which he was forced at gunpoint to drink urine. In BULLET IN THE HEAD, Frank, Ben and Paul are forced to drink urine at gunpoint. It's as if the story Mark tells is being lived by the characters in BULLET. Did you deliberately set out to cross-reference these scenes of humiliation and submission?*

In the scene in which Mark talks about drinking urine, I wanted to express a kind of courage, pride, and dignity in his character. To achieve these he had to go through humiliation and submission. The story of BULLET IN THE HEAD was originally intended for A BETTER TOMORROW 2. In this sequel, I wanted to establish the history of the friendship between Mark and Ho (Ti Lung). Unfortunately, my story was banned by Tsui Hark who wanted to do a story centered around the character played by Dean Shek. But I had not forgotten my original story. I rewrote it as BULLET IN THE HEAD. Instead of two friends, I wanted to do a story about the struggle, friendship and chivalry of three friends, so the urine drinking scene (which was cut from the final version) became a natural extension of a similar scene in A BETTER TOMORROW.

*As Executive Producer, what did Cheng Cheh, an early mentor of yours, actually do on JUST HEROES?*

Cheng Cheh simply owns the film.

*You parodied yourself in JUST HEROES. Discuss this please.*

I intended to parody myself in JUST HEROES. The young apprentice of David Chiang naively and blindly worships the "heroes." I merely wanted to say that "heroes" is only an illusion and do not exist in the real world.

*Was JUST HEROES made out of respect for Cheng Cheh?*

Cheng Cheh was getting old, and his health was not very good. So, a bunch of us students (actors and

directors) got together and made this film to show our respect and gratitude to him. We wanted him and other people to know how much he had influenced the past as well as the future of Hong Kong cinema. Our ultimate goal was to make money for him. We were hoping he could retire comfortably and write his memoirs. But Mr. Cheng did not listen to us. He took the money and went to China to continue making movies. This deepened our respect for him. [JUST HEROES grossed \$HK7,813,329 at the HK boxoffice from 9/89 to 10/93-W5]

*What was the production setup for JUST HEROES?*

JUST HEROES was an extremely low budget film. Every actor and director worked on the film for free. I directed 80% of the film, but I shared screen credit with Wu Ma, Danny Lee and David Chiang (his name now is John Chiang) who also directed parts of the film. The film turned out to be very uneven. We made a lot of compromises because of the budget. However, the spirit in making the film was unified.

*Your films often feature long, visual sequences without dialogue underscored by powerful music. Are these sequences planned completely prior to shooting or do you develop them to a larger extent in the editing? Two sequences, to me, which stand out are 1) The freeze frame of Ben, Paul and Frank hugging at Ben's wedding which dissolves to Ben watching Frank getting beaten by his mother and then washing blood off his head wound in BULLET and 2) The assassination sequence in JUST HEROES that leads to three virtually non-verbal exchanges between characters in the hospital, at the funeral and in David Chiang's flashback to better days.*

Long sequences like these were usually fully planned. But very often I had to make changes on location for various reasons (e.g. some actor could not deliver the performance I wanted or time ran out). And then, since I shot with two or three cameras, I had different shots to choose from when assembling them that made my editing more creative and powerful.

*Do you script specific action? For example, did you detail every gunshot and reaction for the church sequence in THE KILLER and the final shoot out in JUST HEROES?*

Yes, I scripted specific action for both sequences.

*Have you ever felt any pressure from producers, etc. to tone the violence down in your films for commercial reasons?*

I was never pressured by producers to tone down the violence in my films, however, the censor board often makes cuts in my films. They recently made twenty cuts in HARD-BOILED and I was not happy about that.

*I understand the Hong Kong version of BULLET IN THE*

John Woo (L.) with Mei Fai-Lung



*HEAD* climaxes with a car chase and a shootout. The *BULLET* screened at Australian Chinatown cinemas did not feature this sequence. However, under the end credits we hear the sounds of burning metal.

This version of *BULLET* shown in Australian Chinatown was indeed the final version released in HK cinemas. Since the film was too long, the distributor chopped the last 15 minutes. After the release, I re-edited the film – the car chase was put back in, but I eliminated other scenes such as the urine drinking scene in the nightclub. Some of the action scenes were also cut shorter. So the final version runs 129 minutes, but the laser disc version will be much shorter since they can't put 129 minutes on one disc.

*I think BULLET IN THE HEAD is one of the most beautiful films ever made. It was obviously a very special project for you. How did you finance it and for how long did you shoot it? Were there any special problems associated with shooting it outside of Hong Kong?*

Thank you for the compliments on *BULLET*. In a way it is my most personal film. Like I said before, I tried to make the film as a prequel to *A BETTER TOMORROW* but Tsui Hark banned the idea. After I made *A BETTER TOMORROW 2*, I brought the idea up again but Tsui still said no and I was very frustrated. After I finished *THE KILLER* I was forced to leave Film Workshop. My present partner, Terence Chang persuaded me to form my own company (John Woo Film Production Ltd.-MS) he talked to the studio (Golden Princess) on my behalf and presold the film to some territories so as to give the studio confidence. So the film got made. I spent 4 months shooting the film and another 4 in post-production. For the Vietnam sequences, I shot in Thailand and it was a great experience. The Thai crew I used had worked on American productions such as *GOOD MORNING VIETNAM* and *THE KILLING FIELDS* and was extremely professional.

*The scene in THE KILLER in which the white-covered assassins attack Sidney Fung's took you how long to shoot?*

Three days.

*In ONCE A THIEF, the scenes of Chow, Leslie Cheung and Charis Cheung are very touching and quite comical. Do you enjoy working with children and are you interested in making films with younger characters?*

I enjoyed working with the children very much but have no immediate plans to make films primarily about children.

*Kenneth Tsang and Chu Kong have both appeared in THE KILLER AND ONCE A THIEF but few other Hong Kong films. Why is this?*

Both Kenneth and Chu appeared in numerous Hong Kong films when they were younger. They both work full time in TV and Chu is very selective about his film roles.

*Who are your favorite Hong Kong directors? What Hong Kong films have you liked recently?*

I rarely see Hong Kong films because I don't have time. My favorite Chinese director is Hsiao-Hsin of Taiwan.

*(The interview was briefly halted, while John reminisced about various film careers for other directors. He appeared as a priest in Ringo Lam's/Tsui Hark's Jackie Chan actioner TWIN DRAGONS and was killed in the first reel of FORSAKEN COP-MS.)*

*What did you think of Martin Scorsese's GOODFELLAS?*

Scorsese influenced me a great deal and I think *GOODFELLAS* is a masterpiece.

*All your characters talk about the importance of freedom and dreaming. In BULLET, Ben tells Ferry Yuan, "At least I have my dreams. Some people don't even have that." Do these characters speak for you?*

My characters often speak for me. There is a lot of me in Ben. In fact, the first part of the film was based on my experiences in the slums of Hong Kong during my adolescence.

*Films aside, what is important to you?*

What is in my films. Even though there is a lot of violence in my films, I am all for world peace, justice and tolerance. I am not a political person and my outlook is strictly from a humanist point of view.

*What music do you listen to for leisure?*

I like jazz – all kinds of jazz.

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